"I became myself": Exploring cultural learning through stories and storytelling.

Leah Halliday-Johnson

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“I BECAME MYSELF”:
EXPLORING CULTURAL LEARNING
THROUGH STORIES AND STORYTELLING

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DEDICATION

To George, Isabella, William, Michael, and LeAnna

for accepting this journey as part of our lives, and never doubting that I could do it.

And to my father, Dr. Bruce R. Halliday,

for always believing I had something interesting to say.
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ABSTRACT

“I BECAME MYSELF”:
EXPLORING CULTURAL LEARNING THROUGH STORIES AND STORYTELLING

Leah Halliday-Johnson

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Despite broad acknowledgement in education that culturally responsive teaching is essential to meeting learners’ needs, defining and operationalizing culturally responsive teaching remains a challenge. Along with being designed to meet the needs of students from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds who have traditionally been underserved, one commonly identified feature of culturally responsive teaching is building on students’ cultural assets to promote their learning. And while stories and storytelling are among the most common teaching tools, storytelling pedagogies tend to use stories to deliver content or to assess student learning. This dissertation explores collaborative story sharing as an approach to helping preservice teachers understand the implications and complexities of culture as it is lived. Building on a theoretical foundation of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, this dissertation explores a college course on cultural responsiveness, that the author taught in the Spring semester of 2020. The study is a theoretical thematic analysis of the stories that students crafted and shared as an assignment in the course as well as their reflections on their learning and course experiences. The analysis identified a primary theme about the dynamism and complexity
of culture; that theme was supported by secondary themes involving family, diversity, and personal agency. The findings suggest that collaborative story sharing can help learners from diverse cultural backgrounds to recognize and understand one another’s cultural strengths and experiences in ways that foster the asset perspectives of cultural diversity that are essential to culturally responsive teaching.
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CHAPTER I: TWO PROBLEMS CONVERGED

This is the story of a college course. I was the instructor, but this is not a story about my teaching. I designed the course to address a problem, but this story isn’t really about the problem either. Rather, this is a story set in a course and built on a problem. But this story is about the characters. The course gave the characters a reason, a place, and a time to come together, at least for a bit. The story is the coming together. The meeting of characters, myself and the students, of course, but also our stories. Our stories were characters as well. The course pulled us together and shook us up, rearranging our expectations and the roles we thought we were supposed to play. Along the way, we may have learned something. This is the story of figuring that out.

Exposition

Finding the root of a problem sounds cleaner than it is. The phrase has a linear, logical feel, but as any gardener will tell you, pulling roots is hard, especially when a problem is invasive— the roots are extensive and sprawling, frustrating to trace and exhausting to try and remove. But cutting off the problem at the ground simply will not suffice. Because the roots of invasive problems are even more selfishly alive than the parts you can see. You have to dig.

And just as teaching is a type of cultivation, educators know invasive problems. We take them on every day, nipping and pruning at breakneck speeds, hacking away at weeds, not to mention those invasive problems that someone before us planted on purpose, and now they’re choking out new growth. So we begin digging and tracing the
roots, following one as far as we can, hoping we’ll come to the place where a final pull will tear it free. But then we hit a rock, or the bell rings, or we come to a tangle of roots so mixed up and entangled that digging it up might threaten the whole garden. Or, as is frequently the case in my own experience, another problem grabs my attention, and I start the process over again. Still, as frustrating as the process feels at times, it is not futile. Digging away, day after day, begins to yield a sense of orientation. The darkness of the earth seems less obscure at times. We come to a stygian knot of roots where we’d given up before, but this time we recognize some of the other roots feeding into it. It’s not that this problem is so complex and baffling that it would be impossible to sort out. Rather, it’s connected to other problems - they’re supporting or sustaining each other. Systems of problems begin to become clear to us, and while that might not always make them easier to solve, on some days it passes for progress.

The problem I seek to address in this study emerged in this way. I encountered a problem, wrestled with it for a bit, threw a few ideas at it, and ultimately looked away from it. But then I encountered another problem. In digging around and thinking about this one, I began to see connections. The more I considered either problem, the more twisted up they seemed. So, when I got an opportunity to address a problem in my own research, I could no longer get either problem alone. I knew I needed to focus on an intersection of the two.

**Social / Historical Setting – The Hill**

I encountered these problems in two different rooms of the same building. The building is on a university campus, and the campus is on a hill, *The Hill*, if you’re lucky enough to belong here. This university is one of just over one hundred institutions
currently recognized as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States. One of two in the state. HBCUs emerged during legalized segregation to educate Black students. This university, like many HBCUs, began as a state normal school, an institution focused on training Black teachers for segregated Black primary and secondary schools.

I practically grew up on The Hill. My mother worked there for nearly 30 years, and my father had taught there before that. They had moved to the state before I was born because my father joined the faculty. The university had always been a part of my life, but I never really understood its history or significance. As a child, it was just the university. Although everyone in my family was white and college educated, I assumed all universities were full of Black students and faculty. I didn’t realize it was outside the norm for Black women to be university presidents. That’s just how it was. The spirit of Black pride and Black excellence that prevails at HBCUs was simply the way I thought colleges were. I took it for granted.

My great uncle by marriage, a proud alum, was thrilled when we met to learn of my connection to the university. Thrilled but surprised. White residents of the city were not always known to embrace the institution. He shared memories of traveling to town from his home, several states away, by train. “We’d get off the train downtown,” he said, “and run up that hill, suitcases in hand.” He’d smiled with something other than amusement at my reaction. The hill to The Hill is steep - in less than a mile it takes you from a dock on the river to a scenic overlook on campus with an aerial view of half the town. I wouldn’t run up it at all, much less with a suitcase. “Well, believe it or not, we
weren’t really welcome everywhere in town.” No longer a child at that time, it’s not that what he said surprised me really; I just hadn’t considered it.

It’s almost as though the cultural and racial significance of The Hill went unspoken in our town on purpose. For instance, I had learned in school as a child about Martin Luther King Jr. But I had not learned that he led a march of over 10,000 people down that hill from campus to the Capitol building in 1964. Odd that no one mentioned it when everyone seemed so proud of his work for civil rights. But there’s a missing piece to those February narratives of celebration in predominantly white elementary schools. And we might have noticed that piece if they shared King’s connection to our city’s HBCU. No one spent much time talking about what came before the marches. Somehow I had known without understanding that civil rights marches weren’t celebrations. And Uncle Jim came to The Hill nearly 10 years before Dr. King marched down it. Thinking about Uncle Jim running up the hill with his suitcase, I reconsidered the significance of the huge crowds of “peaceful protesters” at those famous marches. A person alone couldn’t count on peace.

Uncle Jim had never considered staying in the city after graduation; he knew he’d never be hired for anything but service or labor in town. Even in the largest, most diverse city in the state, just 45 miles away, he’d only been offered a job as a bellhop. But The Hill was different. He had loved his experience at the university. Two of his four children had followed in his footsteps, and the whole family had often come back for homecoming before he passed away. After graduating, he’d gone back home to Georgia and started a career in youth programming. He’d gone on to run parks and recreation in Chatham county, home to the historic city of Savannah. A park complex bearing his
name now honors his legacy of expanding access to public spaces and programs for all children and families. I wonder how his experiences on (and around) The Hill influenced his vision.

Uncle Jim first came to The Hill in 1954, mere months after the Supreme Court’s Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka Kansas decision declared racial segregation of children in public schools to be illegal. With its history as a school for Black teachers, the complex significance of the Brown decision on Black education, and thereby the Black community, would impact the institution for decades to come. Still, in 1954, Ruby Bridges’s fateful walk to school was still 6 years away, and Brown may have felt more like an empty promise than a substantive change in the law of the land. Either way, when Uncle Jim was on The Hill, teacher training programs would likely not have spent much time worrying about how to train teachers to meet the needs of diverse groups of students. Segregation meant teachers were much more likely to work with uniform groups of students, and those uniform groups generally looked like the teachers.

But, however slowly, Brown did change things. In Uncle Jim’s time, the student body at our university, and most HBCUs, would have been almost entirely Black, and while there have always been white faculty at HBCUs, integration of traditionally white institutions (TWIs), increased competition for Black faculty. So, by the time Uncle Jim’s children came to The Hill in the 1980’s, our institution, like HBCUs nationwide, was much more diverse. Dwyer (2006) notes that because the idea of multiculturalism can be narrowly perceived as Black experiences and perspectives at HBCUs, the racial diversity of the student body and faculty can be understood as evidence of multicultural education. By the time I began working with the School of Education faculty at the university in
2015, the terminology of multicultural education had shifted to favor culturally responsive teaching, and the model of allowing the university’s demographics to do the work was showing signs of stress.

**Problem 1– Defining our Terms: Cultural Competence**

And now we come to the building where two experiences revealed my problem. The experience that actually opened my eyes was the second chronologically, but on a timeline of discovery, it’s a natural place to start. I am in a room on the ground floor of the building, my eyes searching the corners for doors that used to be there, the closet where I used to breathe in the smell of shelves upon shelves of office supplies. The smell of potential, and well-ordered plans. Years ago, this room was part of the Communication Skills Center - the learning center that my mother worked at and later ran. It had been her first job since she and my father had left Ohio. She’d been home with my sister and me until I started school, and then, though she’d wanted to go back to teaching, she’d only been able to get work subbing. That job had been a new start for her. And for me it had seemed. I was always on campus. Going to choir and band performances, seeing guest speakers like Joe Clark of *Lean on Me* fame, and more often than not just hanging out in the learning center. A whole room full of computers I could play on and people who were just waiting to help students learn. The building had since been gutted and renovated, but this had been that room. I felt like a kid again as I walked in.

But this time I entered the room as a faculty member. Brand new and with fewer letters after my name than anyone else there, but I knew I was lucky to be here. I felt my mother’s excitement. The room was now a meeting room, crowded with expensive equipment that no one used because no one knew how; a small whiteboard on wheels and
an easel with giant post-it notes were squeezed between the door and the Smart Board and the Smart Board and the inner-wall of the room respectively. While fairly large, the room feels small because of the disproportionately large modularized conference table with built-in contraptions at each seat that house a laptop. The laptops, however, remain locked under the table at all times. The windows, beyond the scope of the recent renovation, do nothing to open up the room. In fact, they do not open at all. They line the top fourth of one wall, so high up and tilted in such a way that, even if they weren’t completely covered by thick vertical blinds that never budge, which they absolutely are, they would provide a view of nothing but sky. They’d been that way when I was a child as well, but the tall shelves that had partitioned the room had always been topped with plants, and everything had felt lighter. The blinds were new. Without them, the Smart Board that no one knew how to use would have been hard to see on bright days. The room felt dark and claustrophobic, the never-used but nonetheless dated technology, unsettling.

Around the conference table were faculty, staff, and students, mostly from the school of education, but with representatives from other areas. I was there as the faculty liaison to the school of education from the English department, genuinely excited to be involved in the earliest stages of this new committee’s work. We were the inaugural members of the Cultural Competency Committee. The committee’s first goal was to solidify our institution as the premier institution in the region for graduating diverse and culturally competent teachers. We would expand from there. By the end of the first meeting, I understood why my colleagues had been so willing to let me have our spot on the committee.
We spent what felt like hours attempting to define what cultural competency was. Why competency instead of competence? How would we keep our scope inclusive? We knew it involved embracing diversity, but then how were we defining diversity? Some worried that as an HBCU, we would be perceived as focusing exclusively on race, a concern with some connection to research on multiculturalism at HBCUs (Dwyer, 2006). But diversity meant so many things. We tried making lists - census data points, demographics, visible and invisible characteristics. But people would inevitably be left out. Except “people” weren’t really on the list. These were attributes - characteristics. To my frustrated mind, the list became a clown car of the excuses people use to hate each other, but no matter how long the list got, something was missing - context. There was no flesh. No connections or combinations. No overlap. The list told no stories. We were “rubricizing” diversity, constructing a grid of disembodied cultural bits (Maslow, 1948).

Maslow’s (1948) concept of “rubricizing” arises from a theoretical discussion of the ways psychologists might choose to consider experiences, behaviors, and individuals. One may, Maslow argues, take each person, experience, or behavior as “unique and idiosyncratic,” or as “typical, i.e. as an example or representative of one or another class, category, or rubric” (p. 22). A psychologist who takes the latter approach, “does not in the strictest sense examine, attend to, perceive, or even experience the event” (p. 22). This approach, he argues, is common among American psychologists, and becomes problematic in that “psychological activity proceeds as if reality were fixed and stable rather than changing and developing (a state rather than a process), and as if it were discreet and additive rather than interconnected and patterned” (p. 22). While analysis certainly involves taking things apart to look at the pieces, rubricizing carries the risk of
leaving the thing in pieces on the ground, instead of grappling with the interconnections and patterns that make up the whole.

Scholars in education have borrowed Maslow’s concept to challenge “education reformers’ current obsession with utilizing rubrics across the educational spectrum” (Tenam-Zemach, 2015, p. 2). Maslow’s work on rubricizing supports their argument “that rubrics, because of their uniformity and predetermined meanings, represent a threat to both the teachers’ and learners’ understandings of self in the act of the learning process” (Tenam-Zemach, 2015, p. 2). Thus our discussions about diversity and cultural responsiveness that reduced culture to diversity and diversity to a list of characteristics disconnected those elements from lived experience and the ways of being that emerge at the intersections.

These discussions went on for weeks. Every time I thought we would move on to the work we were going to do as a committee, someone would bring us back to the debate over defining our terms, quantitatively and exhaustively. We were a room full of educators from a variety of backgrounds and specializations, and our discussions of culture never touched on the richness, the potential, the untapped assets of so many non-dominant cultures in our society. In fact, we never even discussed our backgrounds or specializations, let alone our personal perspectives on culture and cultural competence. Sitting in the meetings was frustrating. But the challenge was genuine; I could see we were missing something, but I couldn’t put my finger on what. This was a room full of thoughtful, well-meaning people. In my memory it seems farcical at times, but I had no answers in that room. In hindsight, it seems like a natural result of the way we talk about culture and cultural diversity as identifiable outside of the ways of being and knowing
that make them so relevant to teaching and learning. Indeed, Heath (1997) argues, “Current enthusiasm over ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘plural cultures,’ and ‘cultural competence’ often proceeds from essentialist categorizations of entire groups within labels based on racial and ethnic membership” (p. 113). Defining cultural diversity as a list of characteristics felt like trying to understand letters without considering their relationship to words.

I think about the grappling we did in that room differently now. I still believe that cultural competence is inextricable from perspectives on and facility with diversity. But while diversity in a classroom may serve as a useful visual indication that there may be some variety in cultural perspectives, too often “difference” is defined in relation to a white, male, cis-gendered, able-bodied norm rather than in relation to the other people in a space. And even if culture were limited to people with non-dominant characteristics, and those characteristics were objective and had measurable influence, they would still come together in limitless combinations in real people. This “culture-as-diversity-of-characteristics” approach further misses the mark in painting cultural competence as acceptance of people who are “different” rather than a dedication to identifying and building upon the ways of thinking, speaking, interacting, and knowing that a culture can foster in its members.

But despite the frustration I felt at having nothing of substance to offer in that room, I am glad I was there. Something important was conceived there, two things really. The first was a course called Cultural Responsiveness. It would be a prerequisite for entry into our educator preparation programs (EPPs), and it would also be open as an elective to any student who was interested. And while the course would be designed by
our committee chair, a thoughtful educator with years of experiences offering professional development on cultural competence to in-service teachers, I couldn’t help but wonder - considering the time we’d spent struggling to define and discuss what we meant by cultural competence, how were we going to teach it?

This question set me on yet another root hunt. Why was cultural competence so difficult? Was it really simply about being respectful and appreciative of different perspectives, and if so, what made it so difficult to enact in schools? When nearly everyone acknowledged the importance of cultural competence, why were we so often missing opportunities to leverage students’ strengths? The problem nudged me toward this doctoral program with its focus on literacies, languages, cultures, and communities. It stayed with me throughout my coursework, focusing my inquiry and connecting me to practice when my inclination lingered in theoretical abstraction. My interest in culture and its role in education took on a life of its own.

The more I read and learned, the more there was to read and learn. Ideas like code meshing (Young & Barrett, 2018), culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017), funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), and cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 2011) drove my desire to continue learning and exploring. But what grabbed my attention even more were the stories from which the theories and ideological understandings emerged. The stories were rich and alive. They were authentically voiced and enlightening. The stories made complex and difficult issues like privilege and oppression, cultural assets and cultural deficits, and even many of the items from the cultural competency committee’s list of diversities- race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and more - perhaps not knowable, but somehow accessible. For me, it was the stories that fostered
understanding and empowered me to engage in thought and discussion. The stories opened my eyes to the sources of strength that people find and create with and within culture and pushed me to consider how to tap into those sources of strength in classrooms. The stories helped me think about what I’d done and what I’d failed to do in my own teaching experiences as well as why some of my learning experiences had been so powerful.

I came to believe that stories of lives and experiences different from our own could begin to help us understand the power and potential of culture in teaching and learning. And I knew I wanted to test that belief. I began collecting “stories” that I would love to share. I thought about the stories that had spoken to me in my studies, books and articles that I would like to share and discuss again. As I considered what a class about cultural responsiveness could be, I began noticing advertisements, blogs, headlines, songs, and more that connected with one of my experiences or the stories I’d been collecting. I wanted to create a space where students could do that as well. We could read and discuss things together, and then the students could bring in texts to share. And then one day, as I dug around the roots of my new problem, I came to a place I recognized. The roots of this problem intersected with those of another problem I’d encountered and pursued years before. The longer I considered the intersection, the more difficult it became to understand how I’d ever seen them as different problems. But once upon a time, that other problem had seemed to stand on its own. No wonder it had posed such a challenge.
Problem 2– No One Cares what You Think

I first faced this other problem in another room in the same building on The Hill. It was three floors up and hosted a different committee. I was the common element. It was months before I’d be sent downstairs as education liaison, and I was brand new to the composition faculty. Technically, I was a member of the English faculty, but we all knew I was just there to teach composition and the occasional English Ed course that no one else would go near. I was a 30-something, middle-class, straight, cis-gendered, neurotypical, white woman trying to engage in learning and discussion about how best to redesign an entry-level college writing course at an HBCU with a room full of mainly white academics who had better credentials and decades more experience than I did. On top of this, they were mad that the administration was pushing the redesign to work the developmental courses, which carried no college credit but prepared students for the college-level course, out of the curriculum. Not that anyone liked the developmental courses or even really thought they were working, but giving every student access to Comp 101 from their first day on campus did not sit well with everyone.

In this space, premises about what students needed, or lacked, and what college writing was and should be were so normalized that they were hard to detect—room temperature, so to speak. I did not realize, or could not articulate, that these unspoken premises were more than a foundation for a curricular pathway; they were a boundary, like walls of a fortress, protecting the expertise within. So when they insisted that the requirement of “clear and correct grammar and diction,” should maintain its prominence in the shared rubric for the writing course in question, I was bothered, but couldn’t find the words to push back. In my limited teaching experience, I’d invited students to rewrite
Shakespeare in contemporary times and in their own neighborhoods. I’d had them turn James Joyce’s Eveline into a drama and act out the scenes in class. I knew that our students had gifts. However, despite my appreciation for my students’ strengths, I was not able to advocate for them with the urgency and clarity that their facility with language and passion for words deserved. I did, however, bring a suggestion to the table.

Having worked in the learning center for years before this, I had helped students with assignments for almost every professor in this room. I knew which short stories they tended to assign from the anthology and the rhetorical modes they almost always paired with those stories in their paper topics. And I knew how students felt about writing those papers. So I asked what I thought was an easy question. When would it be appropriate in the semester to introduce a personal narrative assignment? I had seen some student engagement with personal narratives as both a high school teacher and an adjunct. I knew that students sometimes warmed up to writing when they had opportunities to write about themselves, and I knew that the papers these faculty were getting every semester could absolutely benefit from a bit of interest and enthusiasm. I thought the beginning of the semester would make sense, but narrative writing as reflection might make sense at midterm or near finals as well. I was interested to hear what my colleagues thought. But I was rebuffed. To paraphrase with a pretty high degree of accuracy, the chair explained: “That’s exactly the problem. They like to write about themselves, sure. It’s the only thing they want to write. The problem is getting them to write analytically about something of substance. No, we avoid narrative.”

Avoid narrative? But English professors trade in stories and narratives. We revel in them as both craft and content. And, frankly, despite the prevalence of objectivity,
analytical reasoning, and rhetoric in academic discourse, the idea that narrative is a powerful learning tool is not particularly controversial. The best teachers have always been storytellers, disseminators of parable, allegory, and metaphor. Sure literature and the humanities teach through stories, but as bell hooks (2010) points out, even mathematicians and scientists, and teachers in those fields leverage the power of story, whether they recognize it or not. As a natural human impulse, story has always been acceptable as a way of teaching. So why not as a way of demonstrating learning? Where are the stories of the learners and the learning in education? While narrative is widely acknowledged as the way people understand the world, and story is often celebrated as a way of teaching, that it is viewed more as a tool than as a result is evident in its positioning. Story is welcome from the lectern, but not from the gallery. It is a tool teachers can use to relate to students and to help them understand just enough of the content to produce dispassionate, impersonal analysis. “Don’t use ‘I’,” is perhaps the most well-known and widely acknowledged piece of writing advice ever, edging out “show don’t tell” by just the margin that might have allowed a bit of storytelling as evidence of understanding to seep into the hallowed halls of learning.

At the time, I did not realize that personal narrative’s place in writing curricula was a point of contention well beyond our small department. While narrative writing had been an important part of my development as a writer in high school during the few golden years of the Kentucky Education Reform Act’s cross-disciplinary writing portfolio requirement, I was not aware that the Common Core State Standards had nearly written it out of the high school ELA curriculum, citing a similarly dismissive rationale to the one I encountered in that room. As reported in Education Week, “David Coleman, the
lead architect of the English/language arts portion of the common core, famously justified the switch in 2011 by telling a group of educators that ‘as you grow up in this world, you realize people really don’t give a shit about what you feel or what you think’” (Will, 2016, para. 5). And honestly, I’m not sure knowing that what my chair had said reflected a common viewpoint in writing education would have helped me effectively articulate an alternative.

Either way, in that moment, in that room, the conversation was over. And while I did not play the role in it that I should have, it stayed with me. And lo and behold, the idea that our students' lives and stories were without substance, or that their experiences had no place in our classrooms came charging back to the forefront of my mind as I pushed to understand why asset-focused, culturally responsive teaching, while ubiquitous in scholarship and discussion, remains elusive in practice. And I began to understand personal stories as the piece I had been missing as I dreamed up my cultural responsiveness course.

**Immediate Setting: Classroom & Characters**

And now, believe it or not, we return to the elevator to follow the story back downstairs. The third room in the story is in the same building, the first floor this time. But take heart. No committee meetings will be taking place in this room. It is a classroom, at least the registrar has assigned it as such. It is a very small classroom, no bigger than a very generous closet. Imagine the closet of a spoiled teenager in an 80’s movie or Angela Bassett's husband in Waiting to Exhale. That’s about the size of it. But instead of designer clothes, this room is stuffed with eight narrow tables in two columns of four. Each table hosts two chairs, side by side, all facing a mounted white board at the
front of the room. The board is medium in size at best, and small in comparison to most classrooms, the right half is completely obstructed anytime anyone squeezes through the door past the strange metal “teacher’s desk,” poised front and center in the classroom, its wheels belying the reality that there is absolutely nowhere else for it to go in this tiny, overcrowded space. The windows, like those in the conference room downstairs, are horizontal rectangles along the top of one wall of the room; and while they’re still impossible to open and angled and mounted too high on the wall to admit a view of anything but sky, at least the broken blinds let in some light.

This is the setting of our story. The setting of the good parts anyway. This is the room where we’ll throw everything we know, and think, and want to learn about personal stories and cultural responsiveness together to see what happens. But as we know nothing good happens in empty rooms, we need to introduce the characters. They joined the course as students, but that is not the right word. No word is exactly right—they were students on my roster, subjects on my IRB application, and friendly faces on my Tuesdays and Thursdays when life outside that room was getting scary. Looking back, I think I’d call them colleagues, teaching the course and writing this story with me. For clarity, in this write-up, they will be students. Just note that they were so much more.

As they trickled in on the first day of class, I was convinced something was wrong. If I had tempted fate by dreaming of a particular mix of students, the dream would not have been this good. By this time, I had taught on The Hill, at least one course a semester, for 13 years. In all that time, I had never had a class that looked so diverse at first glance. Granted, the university president had proclaimed recently that we were the “most diverse HBCU” in America, but the numbers he had shared didn’t really match my
experience in the classroom, and I hadn’t been sure how to take the news in any case. While I noted above that the diversity of all HBCUs increased after Brown, the “diversity” on The Hill had always kind of reminded me of the years I’d lived in Atlanta. Sure, the demographics proved that the city was diverse, but I wouldn’t have known it from my daily experiences. The city was diverse, but the neighborhoods were not. People and communities kept to themselves for the most part. Programs on campus gave that same impression. Unlike Atlanta, our diversity was much more limited to Black and white students and faculty, but our programs felt similarly segregated. If you saw a big group of white women in the computer lab, you knew the school of nursing had reserved it for the periodic testing their accrediting body demanded. Incoming freshman composition courses were almost entirely filled with Black students, perhaps because many of our local (white) students transferred in after completing one or two years at a community college. The school of education, though boasting more Black faculty than most other divisions on campus, was predominantly white in student enrollment. Though here again, professional credentialing tests may have been a factor - the hotly debated mandate to require a passing Praxis score for graduation changed several times in my time on campus, and with it, the enrollment demographics. In terms of gender, from my experience teaching courses, our education majors in music, health / physical education, and secondary math tended to be men; our secondary English and elementary education majors were generally women, and our history education majors were a fairly even mix. I’d never met a science education major. The school of education was very small, though the online master’s program in special education might have been large as it sustained two full-time faculty members who didn’t teach anything else. I wasn’t sure.
Needless to say, I had not allowed myself to hope for too much in terms of diversity in the course. I hadn’t even searched the registration system to see if I could access race or hometown details because I didn’t want to psych myself out before the course began. Our class may have been small, ten who agreed to participate in the study and just two others, but it was a real cross-section of the picture of diversity that our numbers painted. Of the ten participants, five were Black, three were white, one was bi-racial (Black and white), and one was Filipino. Five were women and five were men. I know these things now, but not all were clear right away. I could just tell that as a group, we were much more different than most groups I’d seen around campus, either in classes or extracurriculars - the men’s basketball and football teams were predominantly Black, for instance, while the baseball and golf teams were predominantly white.

The students came from all over. Again, at a larger institution or even in a larger city, this might seem like exaggeration, but for a class here, we were regionally diverse. Granted, five were from in state, but our in-state students were generally from our largest city or the few counties within driving distance of campus. Our course was different, somewhat. Lofton, a Black man, was from the state’s largest city, which was not very far away. While students came to us from there pretty frequently, we also had Kristine, a white woman, from another city in our state that was closer to campus but from which we rarely attracted students. Mindy, a local white woman, like many of our white, local students, was a commuter, but unlike most of our students who started college right out of high school, she was a single mother who had had her daughter as a senior in high school. Tyler, a white man from a rural county in our state, came to The Hill on a golf scholarship. Marcus, a Black man who shared that he was often mistaken for biracial,
hailed from a small historic city in the state, best known as the site of a Civil War fort. Some of the in-state students had visited Marcus’s hometown on elementary school field trips, as had I.

Leslie, a Black woman who was also often mistaken for biracial, was from a neighboring state, as was Terrence, a Black man who shared early on that he was 27 years old. I worried, because he mentioned his age on a couple of occasions, that he felt out of place because of it. The other students were all between 18 and 22. But he shared later that he felt that some of the younger students valued his voice because his age brought wisdom. Jasmine, a woman who was biracial, with a Black father and a white mother, came from Iowa. Carol, a woman of Filipino descent, came from California, but said she hoped to travel to the Philippines where both of her parents had been born and where her father had returned and later died. After COVID forced us all off campus, Tyler mentioned Carol in his follow-up interview, referring to her as “the girl from the Philippines.” But I remembered California. We bonded over it because when I’d visited the state years before, I’d gotten a 50th anniversary sweatshirt from Disney. Carol wore the exact same sweatshirt on the very first day of class.

The last student in our group is the one I learned least about, in terms of his place on the list of characteristics. He was Black and a man. The stories he shared were about playing football and masculinity. Sometimes, those topics overlapped in his stories, but he always focused on one or both. After the course and study were over, I realized that the final discussion I had planned - in which we’d talk about those checklist-type characteristics, how often they’d come through in our stories and how much they mattered in any case - had never happened. I questioned my decision not to collect the
information at the beginning of the semester, mostly because I realized I didn’t know where this young man was from or anything about his family. And yet, the stories he shared sparked discussion about culture, and he engaged with the stories of others. Maybe the stories were enough.

So, though our tiny room was near capacity, we cannot count our list of characters complete. Because none of us came to class alone. We all brought stories, and they became partners in our work, children we would nurture, and guides to new adventures. I brought the story of Geneva Smitherman, the renowned linguistics scholar, from when she was training to become a teacher. I heard her account of being placed in special education speech classes. When she looked around at the other students who had been referred for speech pathology, she, and the instructor of the course, realized what the referrals did not state - everyone there spoke African American English and needed to be taught out of it before they would be allowed to become teachers. Smitherman’s story helped me assure the students that when I invited them to tell their stories, I was inviting them to tell the stories in their own ways.

But Smitherman’s story also helped me in my continual reflection on the complexity of the issues involved in teaching a predominantly Black student body at an HBCU, and it helped me consider how to help other teachers go into rooms full of students who may or may not share their cultural background. Smitherman’s insight that “language programs for the ‘(black) disadvantaged’ were funded to drill black students in the norms of speech etiquette and linguistic politeness of the white middle class, rather than to encourage liberation education” helped me understand my discomfort with ejecting personal narrative from the curriculum (Smitherman, 1979, p. 203). Like the
rejection of students’ language from the academic world, refusing entry to their stories and lived experiences felt to me like a form of gate-keeping and oppression.

And so, in this tiny room, filled with a dream cast of students and stories, I found myself at the intersection of the daunting task of teaching cultural responsiveness and the disheartening practice of excluding stories from the list of ways students learn and know. How could I use what I had learned or come to believe about both to engage pre-service teachers in meaningful and productive discussions? Could stories help prepare them to engage and advocate for their students in the rooms where they might feel nervous, uncomfortable, and under-qualified? Could stories help them succeed where I had failed?

Because while it may be common to encourage preservice teachers to notice and build upon their students’ cultural strengths, stories allow us to understand not only cultural strengths but also the entrenched deficit perspectives that too often work to make those strengths invisible. And when we can help students dislodge their own ingrained notions of cultural deficit, they can begin to equip themselves to disrupt the institutional foundations of those notions. Then we might be approaching something like cultural competence. Stories allow us to understand our problems and opportunities in education inductively, recognizing gaps, in the world of teaching and learning, between what we profess and what we practice. So that is how I define the problem that drives this research, the gap in my understanding that this study is intended to address, the research question:

What can a course devoted to the crafting, sharing, revising, and retelling of students’ stories illuminate about culture and cultural responsiveness in education?
Context in Scholarship

My focus to this point has been very personal. After all, this is ultimately a story about how I came to recognize and understand an intersection of problems, what I tried to do with that understanding, and what happened. But neither problem is one that I have discovered. As I have acknowledged, the research, experiences, and stories of countless scholars in education, anthropology, history, and more have supported both my understanding and my approach to learning more.

Drawing on decades of work in multicultural education, culturally responsive education, culturally relevant education, and the many names and forms it has taken, this study begins with the belief that culture plays an important role in teaching and learning. Further, it is founded on two primary premises. First, culture is complex and multilayered (Banks, 2009; Gay, 2018; Paris, 2012; Spindler & Spindler, 2000); exploring culture through narrative may bring to light the intersectionality that will help future teachers resist essentialism or tokenism in their efforts to enact cultural responsiveness. Stories will not allow disembodied characteristics to wield power unchecked or unquestioned, like dog whistles for cultural stereotypes. Complexity and layers are hard to capture in a checklist, but stories are their natural habitats.

The second foundational premise is that narrative can provide a foothold into cultural reflection and understanding (Gay, 2018; hooks, 2010). Because stories include space for complexity, they can allow multiple perspectives to coexist and intermingle and are effective at revealing both consistencies and inconsistencies in expectations and experience, producing new and unexpected identities. And this is as true, if not moreso, for storytellers as it is for listeners. Frank (2010) asserts that stories demand autonomy in
the tellers: “People are cast into stories, but storytellers invent themselves in the stories they tell” (p. 12). In this light, the telling and sharing of stories, the act of narration, becomes as important to answering the research question as the stories themselves, by connecting listeners, not necessarily or solely to the lived experiences of others, but rather to the interpretation of and reflection on those lived experiences. The form and medium of the telling may also reveal cultural insights. Lee (1993) points out:

[l]iterateness within the African American community includes an attitude toward language use. Whether the text is an oral sermon, political oratory, autobiographical narrative, or simply a good story, language use must demonstrate flair and style, rhythm through selective repetition, and indirection articulated through the use of figurative language. (p. 9)

Here again, expectations can be revealing. Expectations based on what we know of a storyteller’s culture may or may not play out in the storytelling event. Considering these questions in a classroom setting has the potential to foster discussions on the power of expectations in learning experiences. The same can be argued of cultural listening practices or norms that may emerge during storytelling events.

Cultural norms that encourage participative listening and norms associated with traditional schooling may come through or into conflict in instances of storytelling in a classroom setting. Exploring culture in reference to a storyteller’s approach, including the teller’s responsiveness to the audience is well-established in educational research. Foster (1982), for instance, describes student-run sharing time practices in early elementary school where students were free to share without teacher input or oversight. The instances of narrative approach in this case revealed differences between Black and white students
that correspond with cultural narrative practices or norms. In these instances, Black students’ stories were often identified as listeners’ favorites, and were successful in both communicating and holding the listeners’ attention.

Alternatively, Foster (1992) describes sharing time settings that were teacher-led and monitored. In these cases, Black students whose narrative styles represented Black cultural narrative norms were “invariably frustrated because the teachers, all of whom were Anglo, failed to comprehend or appreciate stories being narrated” (p. 305). The narrative wealth of storytellers’ heritage cultures was both evident and successful when the students were given the floor entirely. Still, in a college classroom, the mere absence of authoritative discouragement toward a particular set of cultural norms may be less likely to encourage storytellers to employ their full narrative repertoires. However, encouraging students to share different types of stories for different purposes and to reflect on experience will provide opportunities to identify themes or perspectives that reoccur or are more readily engaged by listeners.

Thus, allowing students to craft and tell their own stories and to share the stories of others will invite cultural perspectives and interpretations to join the discussion, either directly or indirectly, potentially revealing more than even an exact recording of an experience could. Clandinin et al. (2006) allude to the access that other people’s stories can provide: “The stories we live and tell are profoundly influenced by the lived and told narratives in which we are frankembedded” (p. 1). Because cultural knowledge is implicit, it lives within our stories—the ways we see and understand our experiences. So, while writing, or creating, or even just telling a story may encourage reflection on what the story means, even if the storyteller does not specifically address cultural implications
or insights, interactions with cultural narratives will emerge nonetheless. As Frank (2010) indicates, “[s]tories act in human consciousness, with individuals sometimes being aware of what a story is acting and sometimes not” (p. 14). Thus, if we look closely at those stories, we can get insight on the type and function of cultural narratives reflected there. So, both stories and the act of storytelling hold potential for understanding culture and cultural responsiveness.

Further, as the current problem and research question suggest, this study is situated within scholarship in which narrative and storytelling connect with effective pedagogies and culturally responsive teaching and learning. Research involving narrative and/or storytelling includes studies using narrative-focused research methodologies as well as studies of different pedagogical approaches that employ narrative or storytelling in some form. I discuss these areas of research briefly here to illustrate how this study connects with and extends these valuable areas of inquiry in educational research.

**Narrative and Storytelling Pedagogies**

Pedagogies that involve narrative include both teachers and students as storytellers, and these approaches generally call on storytelling as perhaps the first and most well-established approach to teaching. Among contemporary scholars of storytelling and narrative pedagogies, Arendt’s (1970) notion that “storytelling reveals meaning without the error of defining it” captures both the appeal to educators and the benefits to students that permeate this area of scholarship (p. 105). Phillips (2013), for instance, discusses storytelling as pedagogy with primary students by defining four motifs that become evident in practice that centers story: “a walk in the shoes of another, story-tailoring, spinning and weaving, and freedom of expression” (p. iii). In such cases, with
the teacher as the storyteller, students are allowed to discover meaning, rather than having it handed to them, and their responses reflect their learning. In a study focused on social justice narratives, Phillips (2012) notes: “Aesthetic encounters with story provoked affective responses. Retribution and rebellion, though paradoxical to metanarratives of young children and citizenship, were two significant themes amidst these responses” (p. 142). With this example, Phillips demonstrates the power of learning through story to disrupt expectations and allow learners to reconsider prior understanding, a theme that emerges frequently in the research on narrative and culturally responsive teaching that provide context for the current study.

And Phillips’s work is by no means alone in asserting the power strength of narrative pedagogies. Fields et al. (2015) asserts that narrative has “been successfully used for teaching by scholars and practitioners in disciplines such as education (Baloche, 2014; Tracy, 2014; Kramp & Humphreys, 1993); philosophy (Harrrelson, 2012), social work (Phillips, MacGioliaRi, & Callaghan, 2012), and nursing education (Edwards, 2014)” (pp. 69-70). Across these disciplines, stories are proven to help with understanding and remembering content, connecting with new perspectives, and considering practical applications of content. Landrum et al. (2019), for instance, discuss how narrative pedagogies in psychology courses are used to: “(a) create interest, (b) provide a structure for remembering course material, (c) share information in a familiar and accessible form, and (d) create a more personal student–teacher connection” (p. 248). Often, as in the current study, researchers consider the implications of these narrative pedagogies for preservice teachers. For instance, Schmier’s (2021) exploration of digital narratives involves primary students as well as preservice teachers in order to:
explore how providing students and teachers opportunities to use multiple modes
to represent students’ literate identities through digital storytelling might facilitate
students’ abilities to reposition themselves from struggling readers to powerful
learners in the classroom. Teachers can use these stories to learn about their
students as literate children and literacy learners in order to plan meaningful
classroom instruction. (p. 172)

The opportunity that narrative pedagogies can provide for students to define or
redefine themselves as learners is another theme that connects this study with scholarship
on narrative pedagogies, narrative methodologies, and culturally responsive teaching.

**Narrative Methodologies**

Closely connected and sometimes overlapping with research on narrative
pedagogies is research that relies on narrative methodologies. Referencing Carter and
Doyle (1996), Coulter et al. (2007) describe five frameworks “grounded in biographical
and autobiographical perspectives, which involve telling and sharing stories” (p. 107).
These frameworks represent the foundations of a range of methodologies researchers may
explore. They include:

1. **Curerre**—an autobiographical method of generating and reading
   autobiographical texts in order to get at preservice teachers’
   understandings and meanings

2. **Narrative inquiry of personal practical knowledge**—the researcher and
   participant collect observations, journal writing, conversations, and
documents, and mutually construct a narrative
3. Collaborative autobiography—participants in a group setting generate autobiographies of previous, current, and predicted future experiences. The researcher and the participants examine autobiographies for themes and patterns, then they merge their perspectives in a final report.

4. Personal histories—participants construct personal accounts at the request of the researcher.

5. Critical perspectives on life stories—participants create personal histories that are examined by the researcher and participant in light of the larger political and ideological context. (Coulter et al., 2007, p. 107)

Due in part to the shift in the scope of this study caused by COVID and developed more fully in later chapters, this study falls partly within collaborative autobiography, partly within personal histories, and partly within critical perspectives on life stories. But perhaps more relevant to the way the current study ultimately played out is the overlap between narrative methodologies and narrative pedagogies that the authors discuss. In their own study, they note how “the participants were presented with an opportunity to tell, deconstruct, and learn from their own personal stories” (Coulter et al., 2007, p.106). In this way, the research activities involved in their study, a narrative inquiry of a course for preservice teachers, became the curricular activities through which the student participants learned, as was the case with the current study. Stucky (1995) likewise highlights the overlap between narrative methodologies and pedagogies, using the oral histories collected by students, who were simultaneously co-researchers, as both data for the study and curricular content for the course. This blurring of the boundaries or power
dynamics between teachers and learners in meaningful learning experiences leads to the connection of this study with research on culturally responsive teaching.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

While culturally responsive teaching as a field of study is broad and deep, this study connects to scholarship in the field that explores welcoming students’ stories and voices into classrooms as a way to acknowledge their cultural strengths. Such scholarship establishes the damaging effects of deficit perspectives on both learners and teachers. Baker-Bell (2020), for instance, addresses the importance of combating linguistic deficit perspectives, even among the student speakers of traditionally disrespected language varieties themselves: “The only thing worse than Black students’ experiencing anti-black linguistic racism in classrooms is when they internalize it” (p. 10). And inviting students’ own stories into learning spaces is presented as a way to disrupt those notions of deficit. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), in explaining the importance of critical race theory in education, touch on the importance of stories, noting that “Stories provide members of outgroups a vehicle for psychic self preservation” (p. 57). This notion that students can use stories to self-define and thereby protect themselves highlights one real danger of ejecting student narratives from curricula. Students’ stories, as tools of self preservation, are essential not only to their learning, but to their well-being.

Kaler-Jones et al. (2023) affirm the benefits for students of color of pedagogical approaches that center students lives and experiences, saying that such practices “could personalize classroom topics and make topics more relevant” (p. 207) Thus, inviting students’ stories into the course as content provides not only the power of self-authorship, but also the opportunity to invite students to become scholars who can think deeply and
critically not only about texts deemed worthy by an outside authority, but about any texts. As Graff (2008) argues: “we associate the life of the mind too exclusively with subjects and texts that we pre-categorize as weighty in themselves...Real intellectuals turn any subject into grist for their mill through the thoughtful questions they bring to it” (p. 213).

This study also aligns with research on culturally responsive teaching and narrative pedagogies that highlight the benefits to listeners of student stories. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) assert the benefits for listeners who hear stories told by outgroup members: “The exchange of stories from teller to listener can help overcome ethnocentrism and the dysconscious conviction of viewing the world in one way” (p. 57). Quoting King (1991), Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) define dysconscious, as opposed to unconscious, as “an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (p. 66). Kaler-Jones et al. (2023) confirm the importance of pedagogies that welcome a range of students’ experiences and perspectives, calling on the work of Zembylas (2021) and Ribeiro (2017) to argue that storytelling allows listeners come to better understand and connect with storytellers, using stories “to not only learn stories and content, but to feel differently. Storytelling can evoke emotional connections in higher education teaching and learning, which can contribute to greater solidarity” (p. 207).

This benefit to listeners is particularly important for preservice teachers whose perceptions of their students may be impacted by deficit views rooted in racism, despite their intentions to work for the benefit of all students. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explain, “Most oppression does not seem like oppression to the perpetrator.”
Rather, “the dominant group justifies its power with stories—stock explanations—that construct reality in ways to maintain their privilege. Thus, oppression is rationalized, causing little self-examination by the oppressor. Stories by people of color can catalyze the necessary cognitive conflict to jar dysconscious racism” (pp. 57–58).

Thus, the current study illuminates an intersection between several interesting and important areas of scholarship. In using the collaboratively crafted and shared personal stories of a diverse group of students as both course content and data, this study extends the current understanding of the potential of storytelling to foster meaningful and authentic learning experiences involving cultural responsiveness amongst preservice teachers.
CHAPTER II: AN ENGLISH MAJOR IN STORYLAND

I always believed it was the English major in me that was drawn to the stories. In history classes, for instance, I would absorb the characters. The emotional and dramatic significance of their ideas or movements. How were those ideas evident in what we see today? My teachers seemed to love the enthusiasm, but they could not ignore my disciplinary failures. I had no head for dates, or even names of the secondary players really. Who was king? Who cares? We know he’s the antagonist. “These are important details,” their tests would say. “Oh, but there are much more interesting details to think about,” my tangential responses would insist.

Through my undergraduate experience, the only place I felt free to let my mind follow the siren songs that called me—the stories—was in my literature courses. Finding that place where I belonged—where we were encouraged not only to lose ourselves in the words and lives and experiences on the page, but then to come back and talk together about the journey and how and why it changed us—informed everything I believed about learning and knowing. I loved it, and I was proud of how I did it. How the details I pointed out made others smile and nod, or how professors would annotate my papers with exclamation points and praise. I spent my last two years of college almost entirely in literature classrooms, seeing the (mostly Western) world through beautifully crafted, critically acclaimed, academically worthy literature. I did not notice the blinders that these eye-opening experiences placed on me.
Several years later, I decided I wasn’t done with literature classrooms. I was a graduate student, preparing to teach high school English. I was in a cohort of twelve. We had all been English majors, and literature and writing were the passions that drove nearly all of us. We got to take courses on genre, drama, theory, and more. Graduate courses. We studied the history of the English language with one of the country’s leading experts on Chaucer. Our drama professor wore appropriately theatrical scarves and had us over to her house for brunch. We were not a little pleased with ourselves, I assure you. But English language and literature were not the only strands of our curriculum, as much as we might have wished they were.

Our cohort also took education courses in this program. Thirty hours, to be exact, and, as I recall, we were not particularly gracious about this requirement. We groaned. We complained. We rolled our eyes in silent indignation that we, who had learned to travel the world from our cushy library chairs and extract insights from metaphors like intellectual surgeons, we would need whole classes on how to teach. Filling out lesson plan templates and planning activities. We scoffed. We were serious about literature. Scholars in the making. The Chaucer expert pulled me aside after class one day. “You know, I earned my PhD after I was a parent too,” he said. “It’s not too late. And you’re really good at this. I just don’t think you’re going to be happy as a high school English teacher.” And I couldn’t really disagree. The teaching part was not why we were here. You don’t teach literature, after all. You experience it.

In case I was unclear, we were insufferable. And then we met the new education professor. His name was Toby Emert, and he was young and “artsy.” Whereas many of our experienced education professors had noted our passion for literature and coaxed us
gently toward what we needed to know about teaching and learning through the insights of important thinkers and theories that centered what we loved about literature and writing, Dr. Emert’s own passions for arts, literacies, and learning came through in everything he did. He was as serious about education as we were about English. He also loved literature, but in a way that we couldn’t quite condone. He wanted to use it; to open it up and make it accessible when one of the things we loved about it was its inaccessibility. He made us do activities that might help us understand how to welcome more people into literature. He mortified us.

One day, Dr. Emert asked us to draw a map. How did you get here? He handed out big paper, crayons, and markers. I drew it with the self-deprecating humor I injected into most of my life and certainly into any assignment that was at all personal, artsy, or creative. I drew a girl climbing a hill she’d always planned to climb, being accepted into law school and heading to D.C. Then I drew a girl, a stick figure mind you, with a confused look and a big circle where her stick belly used to be. She left the path to law school and headed down a different path, with a little stick baby in her stick arms, to this program where she could become a high school teacher. Like so many of the stories I find myself telling, I thought it was funny when I put it down on paper. But when I had to go to Dr. Emert’s office to “present” my map, I could not laugh or treat it lightly as I had planned. Despite my flippance, I was reckoning with where I was and what that meant to me. How was I going to own it, understand it, and grow from it?

Looking back, Dr. Emert’s approach reminds me of a teacher described in the novel Push by Sapphire. The protagonist has made it to high school, but she can hardly read. She finds herself in a basic reading course in an alternative program to help students
who will not otherwise graduate earn their GEDs. The character brings her defenses, as do some others in the class. She does not belong here. She didn’t even try on the placement exam. The teacher is kind but firm. She welcomes students to take the exam again if they do not think their scores are accurate. She will not accept begrudging participation. Anyone who is there needs to be there. They begin journaling back and forth with the teacher. And the students’ stories become the texts through which they learn.

**Text to Self– Stories for Teaching & Learning**

My experience with Dr. Emert’s map assignment speaks to my engagement with the problem for several reasons. The clearest connection is the stories. The design, delivery, and exploration of this course on cultural responsiveness begins with a premise that stories - of, by, and for the students - can promote cultural understanding through self-reflection and learning. Dr. Emert invited our stories into the class to help us learn just as the reading teacher used journals about students’ lives as texts to help students build literacies. But I have lived with this story for 17 years, and its significance to me shifts with each retelling.

When I reached out to Dr. Emert recently to ask if I could share his name here, he surprised me by saying that he remembered not only the assignment but that I’d written about its impact in a course reflection. I recall the moment of sharing my map with him in his office. How my flippancy had dissolved, and I’d just been sitting there with nothing but my sarcastic stick figures to protect me. The awkwardness and discomfort were sure signs that I was learning something. But when I used to think about it, my focus was almost entirely on the lesson of humility and its role in learning. I had not been ready to
accept that I was not confident in what we were learning in our education courses, so I
had decided to make light of it. I needed to accept that I needed to learn, and this helped
me do it. I respected Dr. Emert’s forethought. He could see what I, and I believe some of
my classmates, needed, and he found a way to meet that need. That is how I told myself
this story at one time.

But the story feels different to me now, having lived in my memory all these
years. And as I was not a qualitative researcher at the time, with field notes and
transcripts or even exact quotes that I can be sure are accurate, I was hesitant to include it
in this exploration. But it is as important to my research as it was to the course design.
The reason that story is important at so many levels of this work is reflected in the
concept of dialogical narrative analysis, which Frank (2010) establishes as a methodology
for understanding stories founded on his theoretical conception of socio-narratology.
Frank (2010) explains, “Dialogical narrative analysis treats stories not as expressions of
an archival memory that already has form and content somewhere outside stories. Rather,
stories are the ongoing work of enacting or performing memory. Stories give memory
recency, salience, and emotional impact” (p. 83). Thus, this work incorporates the stories
that helped me envision, plan and design the course and approach to research as well as
the stories and retellings that help me make sense of what happened and what it might
mean.

So, while I always believed, and still believe, that Dr. Emert’s mapping
assignment was designed to help us, his students, discover what we needed to learn, I
now also see the potential of the assignment for his practice and understanding. I
remember the story because of its effect on me, but Dr. Emert remembers it as well. This
implies an impact on him. As an educator, I now understand that as exciting as it is when we see a student’s eyes light up in understanding, we do not just watch our students learn. We learn with and from them. Our stories revealed who we were - or who we thought we were - and what we might have to offer. I revealed my aspirations and beliefs as well as my challenges. If he had asked for a scholarly reflection on the role of cultural expectations or influences in my teaching philosophy, I’m not sure what he would have gotten. I do know, however, that I would never have admitted out loud that I was struggling to make sense of living a life that I had often scorned - of sacrificing ambition and influence and money to domestic concerns - of becoming a mother before I’d become a success. But my story told him.

And now, like then, telling stories helps me make sense of experiencing firsthand the notorious fate of the best laid plans. Here, experience and scholarship on the power of story overlap with several other relevant areas of research: culturally responsive teaching, and one of its foundational tenets, asset-focused pedagogies, as well as critical literacy. As I explain more extensively in chapter 3, the global COVID pandemic cut this course short at midterm, and I have taken more than two years to reflect on and work to understand this experience in terms of both the plan and the reality. So, while this literature review is informed by the scholarship that inspired the course development and initial research design, I also discuss the scholarship that has helped me understand what happened, and what didn’t happen considering the shifts in both priorities and possibilities that resulted from the pandemic.
Course & Study Design— Story and Culture

Because it is where my understanding of the problem began, I’ll start at the intersection of story, or narrative\(^1\), and culture. We’ve all heard that the eyes are the window to the soul, but Bishop (1990) may provide an even more appropriate metaphor. Bishop argues that children’s literature should offer young readers not only mirrors of their own experiences, and windows into the lives of others, but also sliding glass doors, to transport them to other worlds. While exposure to views of other cultures and ways of life may spark awareness, views alone may not foster cultural understanding. Stories may provide sliding glass doors into cultural experiences and perspectives of insiders, situating cultural knowledge within the complex webs of lived experience where it matters. In chapter 1, I discussed my experience on a committee, trying to define cultural competence as a list of possible categories of difference to be understood and considered in diverse classrooms. The committee’s wariness of defining culture simply as race was valid, particularly in light of research on multicultural education. Banks (1993) references Sleeter and Grant (1987) who “noted the lack of consensus in the field and concluded that a focus on the education of people of color is the only common element among the many different definitions of multicultural education” (Banks, 1993b, p. 3). Thus, to avoid taking a reductionist view of cultural competence, we were attempting to develop a more

\(^1\) In this research, I rely on research from a variety of disciplines. Some scholars use either “story” or “narrative;” some distinguish the two up front and use them distinctly, and others use the terms interchangeably. For a great discussion of the different uses of the term “narrative” across and among fields and the role of the term “story,” which she defines as a “near synonym,” see Ryan (2007). I use the term favored by the scholar I am referencing when possible. In my own thinking, I favor “story” in reference to the texts I asked students to create and share because in light of the academic and scholarly overuse of “narrative,” as outlined by Ryan, I feel “story” better reflects individual ownership. For the same reason, I tend to use narrative in reference to the genre and its uptake in (or exclusion from) schools. I discuss the distinction as it influences my approach later in this chapter in the context of socio-narratology.
inclusive list of ways of being that we wanted our students to understand. But while our list was broader and more inclusive, it was essentially the same approach.

One point of tension in this approach is that, even though the focus is on categories—gender identity, class, race, ability, etc.—the categories still imply a singular or binary default. I now see my discomfort in light of scholarship on multicultural education. Banks (1999) asserts: "The claim that multicultural education is only for ethnic groups of color and the disenfranchised is one of the most pernicious and damaging misconceptions with which the movement has had to cope" (p. 5). Note here how Lee (2007) builds on Banks:

Fundamental concepts about learning and development are based on studies of White, middle-class populations. On the other hand, theories of deviance from a presumed norm focus on what I satirically refer to as the “colored people”; and on the more liberal side, colored people are presumed to be cultural while the White middle class are just human. (p. 7)

I also found the process frustrating as it attempted to isolate characteristics and attributes—both individual and shared—from any holistic lived experience or cultural dynamic. I struggled to make sense of the concept of cultural competence in this way. Or even the concept of culture. Because even if we had succeeded in isolating all of the possible elements that a person might consider markers of cultural identity, the whole will always be more than the sum of parts. I felt the absence of context. I needed the stories. As literary scholar Meretoja (2016) argues: “The way in which our experience is organized is mediated by the cultural narrative webs in which we are entangled. Hence, narratives are not merely a matter of retrospective interpretation but shape the way we
experience things in the first place” (p. 87). According to this conception, our stories are inseparable from our cultural stories. We carry our cultural stories with us and understand our experiences through them. In that way, culture is built upon and understood through and as stories that we continually co-construct. Or, as Meretoja (2016) goes on, “Individual narratives are always woven in relation to cultural narratives that they perpetuate, vary, challenge, and transform” (p. 88).

Just as Meretoja’s conception of cultural narratives suggests a dynamic perspective of culture, anthropology of education scholars George and Louise Spindler describe moving away from using the term “culture,” and replacing it with the term “cultural dialogue” to reflect just how dynamic and interdependent the concept is, particularly in America. Introducing a retrospective of their work of over 50 years in the field, Spindler and Spindler (2000) explain:

[T]here has been a shift from regarding each culture as a bounded entity to a concept of

culture, or at least one kind of culture, as a heritage, a predetermined influence on behavior, that is present in some form in most social interactions and behaviors, but that is in process, being modified and then added to by cultures people constantly manufacture to fit the circumstances of their lives. (p. 2)

This concept of heritage cultures as distinct from but influencing situated culture is evident in the Spindlers’ idea of the distinct selves people inhabit or create. The “enduring self,” is closely tied to the heritage culture and, as its name implies, remains fairly consistent (though not static) throughout life. The “situated self” describes an identity that a person creates and enacts in response to his or her context or situation.
These selves may come and go. Most illuminating, perhaps, for educators, is the concept of the “endangered self.” This identity emerges when the enduring self is in direct and sustained conflict with one or more of the situated selves a person has created in response to a particular context.

And recall that the problem I have unearthed speaks not only of culture, but of fostering cultural competence. Culturally responsive teaching scholar Geneva Gay (2018) paraphrases Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba (1991) to define culture as “a dynamic system of social values, cognitive cues, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order to our own lives as well as the lives of others” (p. 8). The dynamism and complexity evident in these perspectives of culture support the need for context in developing cultural understanding or competence. Just as stories can illuminate, define, and sustain our own cultures, they may, by the same token, provide access to the insights of perspectives informed by other cultures. By revealing the multiple culturally situated selves a person may embody or create, stories can, if we let down our defenses or even simply get caught unawares:

challenge our traditional ways of thinking. Further, we can develop our own narrative literacy, our ability to recognize, understand, and work with stories, by extending our stock of stories, our narrative capital, so that when we are faced with new situations we have far more stories with which to think. (Baldwin, 2016, p.4)

This idea of “stories with which we think” or “narrative capital” calls to mind author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s (2009) TED talk, “The Danger of a Single Story.” By reflecting on her college roommate’s perception of Africa and her own presumptions
about a domestic servant her family employed, she explores the cultural incompetence that can result from a dearth of stories. Adichie understood the experience of her family’s servant only through comparison with her own experiences and culture, allowing her to see only what he lacked by her standards. Similarly, her college roommate had only one story or type of story through which to understand a whole continent and all of the people who live there, and her basis of understanding that story was how it differed from her own. This roommate’s inability to imagine anything close to Adichie’s own experience taught Adichie to take another look at the way she understood her family’s servant. The tendency to understand differences or diversity only in comparison or contrast to a self-centered standard or norm is the essence of the concept of “othering.”

**Othering and Deficit Perspectives in the Social Sciences**

Research in the social sciences has long acknowledged the tendency toward othering. Brons (2015) defines othering as the “construction and identification of the self or in-group and the other or out-group in mutual, unequal opposition by attributing relative inferiority and/or radical alienness to the other/out-group,” further noting that the attribution of superiority and inferiority “is nearly always left implicit” (p. 69-70). The notion that people understand themselves in relation to others, including through comparison and contrast, is perhaps not surprising, yet the implicit attributions of value that undergird the process have implications across interpersonal, social, cultural, and political interactions. In education, one connection to the concept of othering is the

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2 The concept of othering is frequently referenced in the social sciences, and its use here relates to its connection to the cultural deficit perspectives that dominate much of the public discussion and debate in the field of education. While a full exploration of the concept and the rich history of the concept and the robust body of scholarship connected to it is beyond the scope of this study, Brons (2015) offers a comprehensive overview of its origins and major implications, proposing a typology to describe the ways it is taken up or enacted.
cultural deficit perspective that is evident both in measures of success, like standardized tests,\(^3\) as well as in proposed reforms and solutions, such as the system of special education that relies on “proof of intrinsic deficit” (Harry & Klingner, 2007, p. 17).

As has proven true of the oft-cited but never successfully replicated Hart and Risley (1995) “word gap” study, from which data from once-monthly hour-long recording sessions at the homes of 42 families was used as proof of a vocabulary deficit in children from Black working-class families, deficit-based notions that confirm cultural stereotypes can develop a narrative power all their own. Though acknowledged, even in popular media, to be problematic in design and limited in perspective to privilege white, middle-class valuations of language norms and variety, the study maintains prominence in discussions of challenges and reform (Kamenetz, 2018). So, while othering could easily be used strategically and intentionally to support systems of bias and oppression, the implicit valuations involved may exacerbate both hierarchical inferiority and distance in perceptions of out-groups, even in efforts to support members of those groups. And the challenges presented by ingrained deficit perspectives do not end there.

Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin (2010) point out that even counter-narratives, crafted explicitly to challenge deficit perspectives that are supported by othering may risk exploiting, erasing, or dehumanizing those they were developed to defend. This is because these counter-narratives, while offering alternatives to damaging inferiority or deficit-based narratives, still essentially rely on an aspect of othering that views the individuals as objects rather than subjects. Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012) propose

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\(^3\) Research on cultural bias in standardized testing spans decades and demonstrates the bidirectional relationship between this bias and deficit-based perspectives of culture and its influence on teaching and learning. See Hilliard (1979), White (1979), Meaghan & Cass (2004), and Baker (2005) for a small sample of the body.
narrativizing in a way that reflects the point of view of a research participant as an effective way to conduct research that combats othering. Narrative, in this context of their studies of women, involves “A description of the protagonist that combines her subjectivity and the context of her real life, including its oppressive aspects.” Thus, the use of narrative creates space to consider a woman’s “subjectivity both as influenced and created by the context of their real life as well as by her coping with it, either accepting it, partially accepting it, manipulating it, resisting it, or any combination of the above” (p. 301). In this way, narrative allows the researchers to push back against dominant narratives without replacing those narratives with similarly abstracted and objectivizing counter-narratives.

From this perspective, narrative capital, or the stock of stories through which we make sense of experience, relies not only on engagement with multiple stories, but with multiple individual subjectivities. The proposition that these connections between culture, narratives, and subjectivities may serve as a key to challenging deficit perspectives and developing cultural competence is at the heart of both the organization of the course and my approach to understanding it. The Heuristic for Thinking about Culturally Responsive Teaching (HiTCRiT) described by Foster et al. (2020) can provide insight into this proposition in light of scholarship that has already been done on culturally responsive thinking.

**Perspectives on Culturally Responsive Teaching - The HiTCRiT**

My involvement as a collaborator on Foster et al.’s (2020) HiTCRiT has come to influence how I understand the different elements incorporated in the course design and my analysis of the experience. The HiTCRiT reflects a socio-cultural constructivist
perspective of teaching and learning that is influenced by research areas including anthropology of education, cultural linguistics, culturally responsive teaching, multicultural education, and culturally sustaining pedagogies, among others. The HiTCRiT identifies four realms of significance that emerge from this research: texts, style, socio-emotional connections, and institutional knowledge. While the centrality of students’ stories in the course and study design demonstrate an essential connection with the realm of texts, each of these realms is significant to how I introduced and considered stories in this course.

**Texts**

The HiTCRiT defines the realm of texts as understandably broad: “To be sure, texts can include familiar printed material typically seen in classrooms. Texts, however, can also be other objects; street signs, films, arrangements of buildings, clothing styles, any objects that can mediate meaning making” (Foster et al., 2020, p. 70). Because the openness or flexibility of the concept of “story” is essential to this research in terms of the content we explored in class, the data I collected, and my methodological approach to analyzing and discussing the data, it is useful to consider research that explores the intersections of culturally responsive teaching and texts.

Discussing the implementation of her Cultural Modeling Project in a public high school in Chicago, Illinois, Carol Lee references Lev Vygotsky’s description of the difference between spontaneous and scientific concepts. While in Vygotsky’s understanding, “spontaneous concepts were constructed out of everyday experience and knowledge of how to use them [was] largely tacit,” scientific concepts, on the other hand “were learned explicitly in schools, and knowledge of them was more conscious than
tacit” (Lee, 2007, p. 18). This concept illuminates the way Lee reimagined what could be used as a “text” in her classroom and how she could best make texts relevant and relatable to her students. Lee incorporated cultural texts, or “cultural data sets,” including examples of “signifying” a culturally familiar form of ritual insult with which her students were familiar, into her classroom instruction. As students analyzed those cultural data sets, working to make their tacit understandings of the events explicit, Lee re-voices their analyses in language suited to the academic register of literary analysis. In this way, Lee illuminates the spontaneous concepts’ connections to what she calls “domain-specific knowledge,” essentially creating a scaffold from her students’ authentic prior knowledge.

In this vein, the stories students crafted in our course could take a variety of forms. I encouraged them to create their stories in the media and style that they preferred. They likewise found and brought in relevant and significant texts to share with the class to drive discussion. Incorporating texts that are relevant to students’ lives and texts students choose for themselves is widely supported in research.

Such research demonstrates that curricular flexibility and attention to students’ interests in determining the best texts to explore in a course can foster student connections with ideas more complex than their hesitancy with less accessible or relevant texts would suggest. Meier (1996), for instance, describes her experience attempting to craft a liberatory pedagogy by sharing a text that inspired and empowered her, Paolo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed. The problem was that the text was not accessible to most of the students enrolled in her basic literacy course at a city community college. Despite the relevance of the topic to adult literacy learners, considering Freire’s own history teaching literacy to adults in Brazil, Meier’s students did not connect with Freire’s
complex philosophical contribution to the academic discourse on teaching and learning. When Meier accidentally discovered a student’s connection with Malcolm X’s autobiography, she brought the text into the class and found inspiration and engagement along with her students. As an educated White woman, she was not as confident in “teaching” Malcolm X to students whose perspectives and life experiences gave them more insight into the text than she could have. As Meier explains:

Like Malcolm, they had been expected to accept a definition of knowledge so narrow that it excluded anything of relevance to their own lives. Many could also recall incidents in which they had been embarrassed or humiliated by the ignorant and racist remarks of teachers for whom they had subsequently lost all respect, but from whom they were still expected to “learn,” and who still held power over their lives. This, Malcolm implies, was oppression, not education. (p. 63)

By switching the text to one of relevance to her students and with which she was less familiar, Meier became a co-learner with her students, arguably enacting a much more Freirian pedagogy than she had when using the Freire text. This example relates to this research in that I did not approach cultural competence as something I could teach, but rather as something we would share and learn to develop together. In keeping with research on culturally responsive teaching practices and asset-focused pedagogies, my analysis also relies on student contributions and reflections.

**Style**

The HiTCRiT explores the realm of style in culturally responsive teaching as “ways of interacting that would be familiar to particular communities” (Foster et al., 2020, p. 70).
My perspective is informed by scholarship on practices and styles that invite and validate insights from students and community members to combat deficit-based views of students and their families and communities. For example, asset-focused approaches may work to affirm the culturally situated ways people engage in the educational process, particularly the education of children outside of schools. In Shirley Brice Heath’s (1983) influential ethnographic study described in *Ways with Words*, she presents the approach to early childhood education of the working-class Black community of Trackton as a natural and experiential process. She invokes a compelling explanation from one of her adult informants:

> As one parent of a two-year-old boy put it: “Ain’t no use me tellin’ ‘im: learn this, learn that, what’s this, what’s that? He just gotta learn, gotta know; he see one thing one place one time, he know how it go, see sump’n like it again, maybe it be the same, maybe it won’t.” (p. 67)

While this plain-spoken and succinct explanation might be left to stand on its own, Heath translates: “Children are expected to learn how to know when the form belies the meaning and to know contexts of items and to use their understanding of these contexts to draw parallels between items and events” (p. 67). Far from belittling or apologizing for her informant’s explanation, Heath’s translation here may be viewed as serving a dual purpose - it establishes the clarity and power of the linguistic practices of the Trackton community and invokes the language of inductive reasoning and academic achievement to disrupt the deficit-based thinking that clouds Trackton children’s school experiences.
Socio-emotional Connections and Institutional Knowledge

In addition to texts and styles, the HiTCRiT realms of socio-emotional connections and institutional knowledge are also evident in the way I planned the course and study. While both are essential to understanding the learning experiences in this course, they are combined here because in the course design, these realms were necessarily overlapped. While all of the realms will ideally overlap in culturally responsive teaching, this course centered students’ own stories and cultural knowledge in place of a predetermined curriculum of cultural perspectives or understandings. This approach fused the socio-emotional connections within and among the participants with the cultural understanding that would allow them to develop as culturally responsive teachers, as this course was intended to do.

Foster et al. (2020) identify socio-emotional connections in culturally responsive teaching and learning as three pronged; the realm includes practices that engage students in identity work, emotional expression, and social learning experiences. The stories and storytelling that define the course and study were intended to provide opportunities for students to explore how identity is “rooted in students’ social, historical, political, linguistic and cultural histories” (p. 70). They also welcomed and invited the expression of emotions as well as collaboration and social interaction in their development and sharing. The collaborative development and revision process fostered socio-emotional connections within the class community by allowing students opportunities to connect around both differences and similarities.

An essential part of the story development was the collaborative development or workshopping sessions built into the course design. This reflects the realm of institutional
knowledge, or “that which is valued in school, considered useful for understanding, and responding to analyzing, criticizing and solving” because students are invited to be the experts of the cultural knowledge on which the course depends (p. 70). In crafting, developing, and sharing their own stories with their classmates, many of whom are cultural outsiders, they must make their own implicit cultural knowledge explicit to answer questions and incorporate feedback. Listeners are also engaged in recognizing and understanding the cultural implications of the stories as they try to help their classmates develop and improve. The connection in this course between the socio-emotional and institutional knowledge realms is perhaps best illustrated in a discussion of safety and safe houses, a topic that is developed more fully in the findings and discussion chapters.

**Safety and Safe Houses in Cultural Learning**

The role of safety in the class community demonstrates the potential power of the overlap of the HiTCRiT’s realms. The students’ stories, originally conceived primarily as engaging and relevant texts, came to foster a sense of safety through both the socio-emotional connections and the institutional knowledge that drove the experience of this course. The role of safety is more fully developed in chapters 4 and 5, but the concept is also essential to understanding what happened in the course. The reality of the experience of the course ties the study to the body of scholarship connecting safety and narrative in interesting ways. While the story of the course unfolds more completely in chapters 4 and 5, a preview of how the semester went will help illuminate the safety connection. Until the sense of community students had developed through shared inquiry and cultural expertise in the classroom was brought to an abrupt end at midterm, when COVID closed campus and sent everyone home to finish the course online with their variable and
uncertain access to necessary resources, I had not realized how important the safe space of the class environment had been to the reflective and collaborative development of the stories and connections that defined the first half of the course. The change in what students were able to contribute was certainly clear immediately—most students were entirely unable to continue with the course, and those who were able, contributed exposition and/or analysis, despite prompts intended to elicit narrative reflection.

While access to resources undoubtedly played a role in students’ inability to continue with the course, the progression of the course prior to the COVID split suggests that safety likely also played an important role. Chapter 4 explores the practices and experiences that allowed the students to develop what Pratt (1991) calls a “safe house,” where people connect as equals, intentionally laying aside traditional power dynamics to center a commonality—in this case, shared inquiry into cultural understandings and story development. The ways that their interactions and the stories they collaboratively developed both benefited from that safety, creating a sort of self-sustaining safe space, are a primary focus of chapter 4.

However, multi-cultural interactions, particularly between members of non-dominant and dominant cultures, do not generally happen in safe houses. Rather, these interactions happen in what Pratt (1991) calls “contact zones,” or “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (p. 34). These contact zones can be sites of learning, but they are not safe for anyone involved. Unlike Bakhtin’s (1986) notion of contact zones, where individuals’ encounters with and evaluation of the cultural perspectives and beliefs of others become a part of their own reflection and ideological becoming, Pratt
conceives these zones as less dialogical and more prone to misuse by members of dominant cultures for colonization or appropriation of the non-dominant cultures that they encounter. Several aspects of the context of this study, as discussed in Chapter 1, made the course susceptible to the kind of misuse and appropriation that Pratt describes—the history of the university and the education program, the backgrounds of the students and their prior levels of success in educational settings, and even the widespread notion that culturally responsive teaching is necessary in order to help students from socially marginalized communities overcome cultural deficits—any one or combination of these factors might have created the conditions to support Pratt’s contact zone. However, perhaps by disrupting the traditional expectations of a class by replacing a curriculum of predetermined content with one of student-driven inquiry and discovery, this course allowed diverse students to center the commonality of their roles as cultural teachers and learners, as individuals do in Pratt’s safe houses. The agentic repositioning revealed in this analysis, perhaps in line with the notion of ideological becoming, suggests that the space may have functioned as a more Bakhtinian contact zone as well as a safe house. But more on that in the coming chapters.

**Socio-narratology and Narrative Inquiry**

While I have focused heavily on scholarship that influenced my decision to have students create the content for the course by sharing their stories, I also rely on theory and scholarship to illuminate my hearing, understanding, and analysis of the stories and the course experience as a whole. While I discuss much of this scholarship in the coming chapters to elucidate my research methodology and analysis, I explore them here as
foundational to my understanding of how and why this research is important and relevant to the field. These areas include socio-narratology and narrative inquiry.

Narratology, or more specifically Frank’s (2010) conception of socio-narratology, helps me to more fully consider the role of the stories in the experience of this course. The increasingly multidisciplinary applications of narratology offer insight on the many things that stories can be and do. As Frank (2010) explains, “socio-narratology attends to stories as actors, studying what story does, rather than understanding the story as a portal into the mind of a storyteller” (p. 13). In this way, stories are able to bring culture into the classroom, even when the cultural understandings they reflect are implicit or tacit, like Vygotsky’s “spontaneous concepts,” upon which Lee (2007) builds so effectively. Meretoja (2016) “argues for conceptualizing narrative as an interpretative, dialogical, and performative activity of cultural sense-making that is integral to how we understand our past, present, and future possibilities” (p. 82). Meretoja’s “cultural sense-making” reflects Frank’s (2010) “distinction between stories people tell about their own lives and commonly available narratives that are the resources people use to construct their own stories” (p. 14). In this sense, while I asked my students for their stories, those stories would provide the opportunity to listen for the cultural narratives that serve as the building blocks of stories. However, unlike a list of cultural attributes on a whiteboard,

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4 The term sociocnarratology is attributed to Herman (1999) who conceptualized it as an integration of traditional narratology, which explores the structure and function of narrative and sociolinguistics, which looks at language in relation to social factors, in order to more fully appreciate non-literary narratives. Frank’s (2010) conception, termed socio-narratology, is more fluid and is reasonably critiqued by Mildorf (2011) for failing to clearly define narrative or other key terms. However, Frank’s notion of “what stories do” as opposed to what they say or how they say it, was helpful in addressing the research question of this study. His delineation of “socio-narratology” as a theoretical approach to narrative and “dialogical narrative analysis” as a methodology for engaging in socio-narratology are less applicable here except in illuminating some of the different ways that narrative is being taken up across a variety of scholarly disciplines.
cultural narratives can no more be extracted from the hearing of stories than from the
telling.

As noted above, Bakhtin’s (1986) concept of ideological environments is relevant
to how people hear, tell, and transform stories from within their cultural positionings. As
Maguire and Curdt-Christiansen (2007) note, learners pull from language and cultural
communities to which they belong and/or aspire to belong to create “ideological
environments, or ‘contact zones’ (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 14), that offer affordances or
constraints for socializing and learning” (p. 52). So, just as the telling of the stories may
reveal connections to the cultural narratives of the speaker, the hearing of the stories may
reveal connections to the cultural narratives of the listeners. Thus, Frank’s (2010) way of
engaging in socio-narratology, “dialogical narrative analysis,” relies on “the recognition
that people are constantly doing their own narrative analysis, making sense of the stories
they hear” (p. 16). This helps illuminate how the listeners’ reactions, questions, and
engagement with the telling of the stories becomes an important part in this analysis, just
as my reactions and responses, as a participant researcher, play a role.

Scholarship on narrative inquiry and the autoethnographic methods it often
employs helps me conceptualize my position as a participant researcher and how that
influences both what happened and how I made and continue to make sense of it. As
Trahar (2009) notes: “I did not enter the field to gather research data” (sec.3, para.1).
Rather, my research and data-collection emerged from my work as an educator. In
planning and envisioning this course and the study of it, I felt comfortable with the idea
of playing two roles simultaneously. I was confident that my responsibilities to my
students as their instructor would not conflict with my responsibility to the inquiry
driving the research. After all, the course was designed with the research question in mind. However, keeping in mind the focus in autoethnographic approaches on the personal significance of the research and the social context of the research situation was helpful when our semester was cut in half by the pandemic. Likewise, the focus in narrative inquiry, particularly in Clandinin et al. (2006) on living and presenting an ongoing story helped me reflect on the importance and potential of the research even after my relationships with and responsibilities to the students took precedence over my original plan for data collection, altering the scope of my inquiry and confronting me with some unexpected implications of my exploration of the problem.

Ultimately, the wealth of research involving culture and story or narrative supported my inclination to address the intersection of problems established in chapter 1 through the qualitative course study described in chapter 3. Scholarship on othering and deficit perspectives confirmed that narrative approaches to teaching, learning, and researching are essential to understanding the complexity of culture as a dynamic lived experience. The field of culturally responsive teaching reveals connections between the course and study to perspectives and practices that have provided insight on the broad potential for developing and exploring students’ stories in recognizing and sharing cultural wealth. Finally socio-narratology, autoethnography, and narrative inquiry all contribute to the analysis and reflection in this study on the affordances and limitations of story for cultural teaching and learning.
CHAPTER III: THEMATIC ANALYSIS– IN THE SHADOW OF DISCOURSE

Whenever I think about my high school teaching days, one scene comes to mind. It was the sixth period of a very long day, and I was relieved. In a schedule full of sophomores, this was my one class of seniors. They were a breath of fresh air. As they trickled in on this day, I was glad to see Mr. Lilac. His first name was James, but he told me I could use his last name since I liked it so much. Mr. Lilac had, as Shirley Brice Heath would describe it, a way with words. Whenever he felt like it, out of the blue or in a lull of our work, he’d erupt in verbal artistry. I don’t know if he would have called it spoken word, rap, or something else, but whatever it was, I always listened. I never asked him to stop. And on this day, I directly requested it: “I’m so glad you’re here today, Mr. Lilac. It’s been a day. Say something beautiful, would you?” He grinned, humoring me. Then, as casually as someone else might comment on the weather, he opened his mouth and spoke poetry.

I think about Mr. Lilac often, but I did not immediately think of him when I began preparing for this research. He must have known he made our class more enjoyable, but his grandfather’s reaction when I praised James at parent-teacher night made me realize that perhaps not all of his teachers had recognized his brilliance. And even though I did, I had failed him. How had I not written his words on the board? Why had we not studied the lines? How is it possible that we had no conversation about what he called his art and why? I was his language arts teacher, and though I’m glad I appreciated the artistry of his language, the reason James did not come to my mind as soon as I began this endeavor
is that I had stopped at his language—how he said things so beautifully and cleverly. If I had listened more closely to what he said—if I had engaged with his story—I might have discovered a way to invite both his words and his story into our classroom. I might have realized sooner that those elusive texts—the ones that will engage students in our subjects and the learning experiences we want to create—are sometimes the ones they bring with them.

How much rich material simply floated past me as my students struggled to connect with a shared set of a decades-old textbook? This study serves as a second chance. It aims to explore what can happen when a small group of people come together in a class about culture to tell, listen to, engage with, understand, and use their stories. Indeed, the course content was primarily students’ stories of their lives and experiences, which they developed and revised in collaboration with their classmates. A thematic analysis of the stories as they developed in the course, supported by the students’ reflections on their learning and the experience, offers insight into the affordances of such a course.

**Research Purpose**

With this research, I set out to explore the connection between two problems I had encountered in education—how to help future teachers develop cultural responsiveness and what role personal narratives and storytelling could or should play in teaching and learning.

The first emerged as a problem when I noticed the discrepancy between the widespread belief that cultural responsiveness is essential to teaching and learning and the relative lack of understanding or consensus about how to help pre-service teachers develop it.
While “getting to know your students” emerges as a convincing component (Rose, 1989; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009), examples of how to do so range from visiting students’ homes and families to spending extensive time living or otherwise engaging in their communities. But as valuable as these authentic approaches may be to practicing teachers and/or researchers, they may not be scalable to all schools or districts and may be impracticable for preservice teachers who don’t even know where they will teach from one semester to the next but would still benefit from practice being culturally responsive. The problem of finding a place for personal narratives and storytelling in the classroom emerged from my dissatisfaction with their expulsion from English and language arts curricula. That exclusion bothered me because I had experienced both teaching experiences in which I had engaged and connected with students through stories and learning experiences that revealed the resistance of stories to the oversimplification of complex ideas. Narrative reflection is widely used in teacher education, and in my experience, narrative reflection can reveal parts of us that we might not otherwise be able to articulate. So, I wanted to know how inviting students' stories and narrative reflections into the learning process might connect with my struggle to understand and teach cultural responsiveness in teacher education.

**Research Question**

This course and the study of it represent a shared exploration. I am a learner and a teacher as are the students in the course. So the question that drives this study is open enough to welcome discovery and is focused primarily on the connections between stories and cultural responsiveness:
What can a course devoted to the crafting, sharing, revising, and retelling of students’ stories illuminate about culture and cultural responsiveness in education?

**Theoretical Foundations**

Foundational to the design and study of this course is Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. His concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) informs both the design of the course activities that serve as the primary source of data for the study and the additional sources of data through which I examined those activities from the participants’ perspectives. Vygotsky (1978) describes the ZPD as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). As cultural knowledge consists of what Vygotsky would call “spontaneous concepts,” in that they are learned informally or naturally through experience, my goal was for our course to become a ZPD in which students’ stories made each of them a more knowledgeable or capable peer in relation to their particular cultural identities, particularly as taking on the teaching role of a more knowledgeable peer would require making the cultural perspectives reflected in their stories explicit. Further, as the ZPD is future oriented, working within it reveals and develops potential. So building narrative capital in this way can be viewed as a step toward cultural responsiveness, conceived as the ability to create “learning environments that allow students to use cultural elements, cultural capital, and other recognizable knowledge from their experiences to learn new content and information to enhance their schooling experiences and academic success” (Howard, 2012, pp. 549–550).
In addition to constructing assignments and activities that would allow students to teach and learn from one another, the research design required that I be transparent and reflexive about my roles and goals. Thus, our earliest discussions and the informed consent process involved my sharing the purpose and goals of study. I established that I wanted to know what, if anything, we could learn about culture from sharing stories about our experiences as well as our perceptions of the stories of others that caught our attention. I explained my premise that culture’s relevance or productive potential for education can be lost in the abstractions we employ to discuss diversity. Because stories include context and specificity, I believed they could help us consider culture, as it plays out in our lives and experiences, more meaningfully. I explained what I understood as the foundational premise of the course— that in sharing and discussing stories together, everyone would have the opportunity to teach and learn from everyone else. I outlined the intent of the course structure to position each author or speaker as an expert in turn, and that their experiences and perceptions were to serve as the core content of the course and the study of it. I assured them that having students teach each other was a common practice founded on constructivist principles and offered to discuss my teaching philosophy or the theoretical foundations of the study more thoroughly at any time.

However, though the design represented my effort to create a sort of communal ZPD of cultural understanding, sustained by each according to ability for each according to need, my perception of the course was not enough to invoke the power of the ZPD. Wertsch’s (1985) operationalization of the ZPD through the constructs of situation definition, intersubjectivity, and semiotic mediation provides a framework for understanding the relation of the ZPD to this course and research design. Wertsch (1985)
describes situation definition as “the way in which a setting or context is represented - that is defined - by those who are operating in that setting” (p. 8). Thus while my goal was to have the students and their stories share the role of more knowledgeable other in turns, I also shared reflective stories and activities that highlighted my position as a co-learner in the course. Likewise, different course assignments and activities asked that students take on different roles for different purposes.

Calling attention to the intended roles in different assignments created opportunities to clarify our situation definitions, and work toward intersubjectivity, which Wertsch explains is achieved when the situation definitions of the different participants in the ZPD match, and the participants recognize that they match. This recognition of consistency in the situation definition of different participants is an element of Wertsch’s (1985) notion of intersubjectivity within the ZPD that connects to a more general definition of intersubjectivity in storytelling, which can be understood as the development of shared understandings between speakers and listeners, suggesting that stories can be an effective way to understand learning or growth within the ZPD.

In addition to course assignments and activities that invoked different roles, the study incorporated opportunities for participants to reflect on the different assignments after they were complete. Participants were invited to tell their stories and share their reflections on the style and mode of their choice in an effort to elicit authentic perspectives, as opposed to restatements of the perspectives that had emerged as “correct” or expected through repetition of prompted language or form. For instance, participants were asked to define their own contributions to the course as well as the outcomes of course experiences that they had seen as effective. Their responses guided
the situations we examined together, providing opportunities to use semiotic mediation to negotiate our situation definitions, maintaining intersubjectivity. Here again, while my reflections and reflexivity with the students about the course and my research supplement the data, they emerge from the sociocultural theoretical foundation of the study.

Method(ology)

I identify the methodology of this study as a theoretical thematic analysis with a focus on story. While thematic analysis, because it is not embedded within a particular theoretical framework, may be considered a method as opposed to a methodology, it is the best approach to understanding the data from this study because unlike other narrative-focused methodologies, thematic analysis honors the subjectivity of the storyteller and the story as a socially constructed product. The data I collected from students were primarily in story form, and my own reflections both during and after the study involved rethinking and retelling both the narratives that emerged from the course and of my experiences outside the course that arose in my thinking to challenge and be challenged by my understandings of the development and sharing of the stories as the essential element of the course experience. Additionally, just as thematic analysis honors the story and storyteller, it does not rely on data types that would focus on substantial change over time as the study was interrupted at the halfway point by the COVID-19 lockdown. Our course shifted online, and students’ opportunities to collaborate, and for some their ability to participate at all, were drastically curtailed, as was our ability to enact and work within a ZPD. Thematic analysis provided an opportunity to examine the content of the stories as they were presented.
Ultimately, the original plan to use a narrative inquiry methodology, particularly one in which “the inquiry begins with the ‘living’ of stories,” which may have been appropriate if the course had continued as planned, was not feasible because:

In these studies, the beginning point is in living in relation with participants. The research ground for such studies is the ongoing life of participants. Of course, there are also tellings involved in such studies, but living is the main focus.

(Clandinin, 2006, p. xi)

Further, my original plan for a narrative inquiry involved considerable collaboration with students and participants to consider and revise representations of their stories and perspectives, such as narrative retellings and small group and individual conferences toward the end and after the course. These collaborative experiences were not possible after COVID closed campus. While online collaboration has certainly improved as a result of that sudden shift, the improvement has taken considerable time. When the magnitude of the pandemic became real and apparent, priorities necessarily shifted, and my duty of care to students superseded my roles as course instructor, co-learner, and researcher. I did not feel that I could ethically require anything more from them. I adapted assignments to be easier to complete in lockdown, but I assured students that they would not be penalized if they could not submit them. Students with the resources, time, and energy to do so continued to share reflections online; however, collaboration, and thereby our communal ZPD, came to an end. Exploring the lived story of our experience of the course would thus have forced our focus too far from the intersection of stories and cultural responsiveness.
Nonetheless, the work we had done together in the first half of the study and the work that some participants were able to continue, despite our relative isolation from one another, in the second half had yielded a rich body of qualitative data that was relevant to my research question. The focus and breadth of the data set made it well suited to the approach of theoretical thematic analysis. “Thematic analysis,” Braun and Clarke (2006) assert, “is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). It is particularly appropriate for this study because it demands reflexivity and explicit discussion of theoretical and analytical decision-making on the part of the researcher; this need to be reflexive helped ensure that the shifts in method were both true to the original research purpose and explicitly tied to the data. Further, because the theoretical foundations of the study were tied so closely to the research question and course design, I chose to conduct a theoretical or deductive thematic analysis.

The distinction between theoretical/deductive and inductive approaches to thematic analysis relates to the way the data is coded to identify themes in relation to the research question.Acknowledging the direct connection between my research question and my approach to coding minimizes the risk of suggesting that the identified themes reflect the objective reality of the data set as opposed to my interpretation of it. The distinction was important to me because the sociocultural theoretical foundation rejects objectivist understandings of knowledge. Thematic analysis accommodates a variety of theoretical and epistemological positions, as long as “the theoretical framework and methods match what the researcher wants to know, and that they acknowledge these decisions, and recognise them as decisions” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80). Still, while Braun and Clarke stress the flexibility of thematic analysis, the narrative focus of the
original research design integrates within this analysis perhaps more local context than Riessman (2008) suggests is generally included in thematic analyses.

Further, the identification of themes in my analysis is complicated by my dual positionality as a participant researcher. I both designed and conducted the study and served as the instructor of the course at its heart. This is important because the data analysis and the course learning objectives represent different relationships with narrative. My positionalities reflect both sides of the ongoing debate in the field of narrative inquiry over whether narrative is meant to be used for description or intervention, “that is, does narrative inquiry set out to change the world as people engage in the processes of narrative inquiry with their participants, or is it a more descriptive kind of inquiry?” (Clandinin, 2007, p. xv). As a researcher, my goal of making sense of the data through thematic analysis is “a more descriptive kind of inquiry.” However, the course design was inspired by a narrative inquiry approach that was much more didactic. I hoped that our deep and shared engagement with stories would help us all develop better understandings of the complexities and power of culture and cultural reflection both within and beyond the field of education. At times, in my own thinking, those positionalities become difficult to distinguish. For instance, since the study has ended, I have found my researcher’s drive to understand what did happen confounded by my teacher’s focus on what I had hoped would happen. Thus, thematic analysis is appropriate as it encourages both thick description and continual reflexivity to ensure transparency and reliability. Likewise, the data sources and collection methods are compatible with thematic analysis as they reflect the transparency and collaboration amongst the researcher and participants that informed the course and study design.
Methods / Data Collection

This study was designed to examine a sixteen-week college course. Despite the unexpected modality shift necessitated by the COVID lockdown at midterm, which extended spring break by a week to allow time for the transition, the course ran for fifteen weeks. However, as the change in modality necessitated a change from narrative inquiry to thematic analysis, the data set for this study is limited to the data items with the potential to address the research question from the perspective of a thematic analysis, as discussed below. Relevant data types include the students’ narrative autobiography presentations, which included collaborative workshopping sessions, individual midterm conferences, final reflections, and follow-up meetings. My field notes and reflexive journals were also useful in reviewing the analysis and writing up the report. Each item and the collection methods are described below.

Narrative Autobiography Presentations (NAPs)

The narrative autobiography presentations represent the majority of the data in the study as we devoted more class time to working on and completing them than to any other endeavor. The original course plan had been to revise and expand on these throughout the semester, but as participants relied on campus resources (computers, software, and internet access) as well as in-class collaboration to complete them, the presentations that took place before midterm were all that were completed. Nine participants presented a first draft, and six of those presented a second draft. One participant shared a verbal plan only. The presentations, as described further below, included collaborative workshopping. Because presenters invited questions and participation throughout their presentations, it is not feasible to distinguish between the
presentation of the stories and the feedback / collaborative development. Thus, the audio recordings and transcripts of these sessions represent the whole presentation / feedback experience. The length of the presentations varied and reflected not only the story as the presenter had planned and arranged it, but also the level and depth of engagement from the listeners. Presentations ranged in time from 5 minutes, 38 seconds of audio recording / 579 words transcribed for the shortest presentation to 23 minutes, 28 seconds of audio / 2996 words transcribed for the longest. The average length of the presentations was just over 14 minutes, and the transcriptions averaged 1618 words.

In the instructions for this assignment students were asked to share a story from their lives that they believed gave insight into one or more of their cultural communities. Students knew up front that they would present these autobiographies in class, and expected to have multiple opportunities to revise and present. Prior to the assignment, we discussed culture in terms of group memberships and multiple identities. I explained that for this assignment, they could focus on any one or more of the communities to which they belonged. I also shared my belief that stories helped us both represent and change our perspectives. I shared an excerpt from Gay (2018) called “The need for and nature of story.” My purpose in sharing my perspective and the excerpt was to demonstrate to them that the power and importance of story in learning was not just some ex-English teacher’s romantic notion or an attempt to avoid having to design a curriculum and pick readings on my own. I knew that their stories and cultural perspectives had likely not been welcomed or valued in educational settings, so I wanted them to understand that I believed their ideas were important in this space, and why.
They chose to brainstorm their ideas in class and then talk as a group about whether the ideas would work in light of our learning objectives and the assignment description from the syllabus:

“Without a sense of identity, there can be no real struggle” (Freire, 2018).

Aspiring teachers who would understand and connect with the cultural assets of their students must begin by understanding and connecting with their own cultural assets. Further, such aspiring teachers must become aware of the many ways that culture is manifested through narrative and reflection. This assignment will allow class participants to reflect on their own experiences and world views through a cultural lens. (Syllabus, Appendix I)

Any form or medium was welcome, but I suggested that the stories include visuals and/or sound if either would be appropriate. This was primarily to prevent students from feeling constrained by any personal narrative essay assignments they may have had in the past. I wanted to make room for their interpretations of the assignment. These supplements included 2 PowerPoint presentations of 8 and 10 slides, 2 Google Slides presentations of 6 and 7 slides, 3 written Word documents of between 3 and 4 double-spaced pages, and 2 Prezis of 21 and 43 slides. One student created a video for her second submission but did not upload a copy or link before being sent home for COVID, so that video is present in the data set only in the audio recording of her presentation and in the mentions of it by other students in conferences and reflection assignments. These supplements, other than the text documents, were primarily snapshots and Google Maps images. Students submitted these artifacts in a discussion board in Blackboard as links. One student emailed the link to his written version because he was
uncomfortable with Blackboard. However, as the links that students provided were to live documents that students updated as they developed their stories, these elements were neither complete nor anchored directly to specific elements in the presentation. Students used them as visual cues during presentations and discussed ideas about developing those items further in later versions, but efforts to code them in their own right, as discussed below, did not clearly reflect or illuminate their connections to the stories, so they were considered in the data set only when they were directly referenced in the presentation transcripts.

Within the context of this assignment, students crafted stories about their school experiences, home lives, hobbies, and hair. They shared stories of finding connections and losing loved ones. They shared points of pride, disappointment, and understanding. They frequently surprised each other and themselves with the stories that they shared.

For additional context, I explained to students in our discussions of the assignment that in the research and planning I’d done for the course, some scholars used the terms “narratives or personal narratives” and others used “story or stories.” I wanted students to think about the assignment in whichever terms made them feel free to shape and define the product as they liked. I called them narrative autobiographies in the syllabus and to distinguish them as an assignment because I wanted narrative descriptions to be included, but I thought of them first and foremost as stories. I wanted their stories to give us insight into their lives and perspectives. Presentations were given during class. Students read from notes or written texts and/or talked through slideshows. The data from the presentations include audio recordings and the transcripts of those recordings.
**NAPs - Workshopping Sessions**

The NAP assignment was intended to include an individual presentation followed by a distinct workshopping session. However, as mentioned above, in practice the NAPs were interactive throughout. The first presenter engaged the audience with questions and requests for feedback throughout his presentation, and this became the model for all of the presenters who followed, even those sharing second drafts. Thus, in the data set, it was not possible to separate the stories from the collaborative development that took place during the presentations. These collaborative elements are included in the recordings and transcripts noted above in the description of the NAPs. However, the workshopping sessions or contributions are distinguished in the discussion of the data when doing so helps provide clarity about the context of each data extract. Classmates were encouraged to offer feedback and ask questions throughout the presentations, and presenters’ responses more often than not developed and defined the impact of the stories. Student presenters answered questions and sometimes asked questions as well. The sessions included developments to and revisions of the stories as well as discussions about the implications of the stories and how the stories connected to other students’ experiences and other stories or course content. Still, in the data, the workshopping contributions are included in the NAP recordings and transcripts.

**Midterm Conferences (MCs)**

These one-on-one conferences between me and each student were an assignment for everyone, but for the participants only, I also sought feedback on the ongoing research and audio recorded the meetings. These conferences were held on campus in an office I was able to use as an adjunct. I canceled one class meeting to ensure that all students
could fit a conference into their schedules, but students were free to schedule at other times as well. All students had the opportunity to share:

- What they saw as their major contributions to the class
- What they were getting from the class
- Impressions of what was going well and what wasn’t
- Any other insights or ideas they wanted to share or discuss with me

With research participants, I also shared my initial perceptions and ideas from my field notes and gave them the opportunity to address those perceptions. With the exception of one meeting that took place earlier in the same week, all of the meetings took place the last day we were scheduled to meet before spring break. The meetings were therefore the last time I saw the students in person during the study. I met with nine of the ten study participants, and the meetings ranged in length from just under 10 minutes to just under 15 minutes. The data includes audio recordings and transcripts ranging from 849 to 1738 words.

**Final reflections (FRs)**

This assignment took the place of the planned end-of-term conferences. Students were asked to offer reflections on the course as a whole, their contributions, what they learned, and any insights they could offer on how the switch to online had affected our class community or course experience. These responses were submitted as Word documents and submitted as an assignment (visible only to the instructor) in Blackboard. I assigned this reflection after the course shift and after I had explained to students that they had all passed and would not be penalized if they were unable to continue participating. Perhaps it is not surprising that I received only four reflections. They
ranged in length from 651 words to 848 words. Another student shared reflections on the course in a shared discussion board that I created for students to communicate. It was over 2000 words in length and included photographs. Students were invited to schedule a virtual meeting with me to discuss their reflections if they preferred, but no one did.

**Follow-up Meetings (FUMs)**

I invited all student participants to meet with me one-on-one virtually to discuss the course as a whole and my reflections/ideas on the study so far in the semester following the course. Two students met with me. During these meetings, I shared my reflections on the course and ideas that had emerged from my initial reviews of the data. They shared what they remembered and how their memories related to my thinking. The meetings were held virtually in our Blackboard course shell on the internal meeting platform, Collaborate. Recordings were saved as .mp4 files. One was 22 minutes, 10 seconds and the other was 20 minutes, 13 seconds.

**Field Notes / Reflexive Journals**

I took field notes throughout the first half of the course. For the first 3 weeks of the course, I completed reflections after Thursday’s class sessions to reflect on the week. I wrote about what activities went well, which presentations sparked discussion and why, and how fully students seemed to be engaging. These first three Thursday reflections range from 250 to 400 words each, captured as a bulleted, informal list of thoughts with the dates as headings. For weeks four, five, and 6, I kept a running document of notes to help me remember what had stood out during the class presentations so that I would have an easier time following the audio recordings later. I also took quick notes during and after classes to keep track of ideas, relationships, conversations with students that were
not a part of recorded class events, and the like. I kept these notes in a dated, bulleted format as well, but they were more brief. The weeks 4–6 field notes took up less than two pages in the bulleted format. An example from my first weekly reflection notes were my impressions of a student leaving during the first class session. The incident had worried me, and my field notes allowed me to develop a thick description of the interaction to contextualize my conclusions at the opening of Chapter 5.

Other field notes that helped with the write-up include those I captured when Terrence stayed after class on two occasions just to chat about his family and work. I jotted down a paragraph each time to help me remember the context he’d shared in case it might help in understanding his work or class contributions. As it turned out, this student was the only participant who did not present even a first draft NAP, and who had such limited wifi and computer access after the COVID shift that he was unable to even log back into Blackboard. Thus, during the coding process, as I did not feel comfortable considering his emails in the data set, as they were addressed to all of his faculty members and some administrators to explain his situation, my field notes on our after-class conversations helped me evaluate my impressions of his midterm conference and contributions to his classmates’ workshopping sessions for likely consistency with his perspective of his role in the course community.

As a whole, the field notes from before the COVID shift were particularly useful in helping me remind students of class events to elicit their thoughts on what had happened during midterm conferences and in writing up the thick descriptions of the presentations, particularly as my brief class notes included context to help make sense of pauses and laughter in the audio.
After the COVID midterm shift, my notes were more sporadic and more reflective. I wrote about what we had been able to do and how we had been able to connect before the shift and what we might have been able to do better after the shift. I wrote about my discomfort analyzing the course as a researcher when I wasn’t even comfortable grading students’ work as the instructor. I whined about this dissertation and having to homeschool my own children. The running document where I kept these notes totals three pages of sporadically chunked or bulleted notes. These consisted primarily of nagging questions about the stories that stayed with me from the course. One note, for instance, read “Lofton found people like him in middle and high school and loved it after having been at a predominantly white elementary school. Tyler was in a predominantly white community and schools all his life but then chose to attend college on The Hill. What do we get from these stories? Why the difference?” I labeled those notes reflexive journals, and continued using that label throughout my note-taking / reflecting during the data analysis and write-up process. The reflexive journals have been helpful in including the trustworthiness criteria, discussed below, in the write-up. These journals helped me trace my thinking as I shifted from narrative inquiry to thematic analysis and helped me reflect on and share the missteps and iterations I worked through as I simultaneously learned about and completed this thematic analysis.

Table 3.1 outlines the various sources of data, the assignment or research context that elicited or prompted each item, the form or type of data, and the level of collaboration or interaction that the item represents.
Table 3.1: Contextual Overview of Methods / Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment / Research Context</th>
<th>Data Collection / Form &amp; Context</th>
<th>Collaborative / Interactive Context</th>
<th>Data Analysis Preview**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Autobiography Presentations (NAPs)</td>
<td>Individual assignment - Topics were to be autobiographical and narrative and should involve one or more of the presenter’s cultural communities. Form/medium was open. Discussion of culture and story/narrative took place before the assignment was given. Presentations include first and (some) second drafts that were presented before COVID.</td>
<td>Data include audio recordings and transcripts of 15 presentations (including workshopping discussions)--9 first drafts &amp; 6 second drafts.* Average presentation length was 14 minutes. Presentations took place during class. Students spoke and shared visuals when available. Workshopping interactions overlapped with presentations, so separating the transcripts into discrete events was not feasible. Supplemental artifacts included PowerPoint and Google Slides presentations, and Word documents submitted in Blackboard or via email as links.</td>
<td>The discussion board where students submitted their autobiographies was open to everyone but students did not interact in that board. During the presentations, students interacted, and the interactions were recorded &amp; transcribed. These are the stories at the heart of the course and study design. They engaged students in collaboration and serve in the write-up to establish or center the subjectivity of the participants. Presentations were audio recorded. The recordings were transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed through thematic coding (described below)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm conferences (MCs)</td>
<td>Part assignment/ part research Students self-assessed on course performance, shared insights about the course and their learning</td>
<td>These conferences were face-to-face meetings in an office on campus. Conferences ranged from 10 to 15 minutes in length. The data from these</td>
<td>These were one-on-one, instructor / student interactions. These conferences allowed students to reflect on their learning and to engage with (and confirm / challenge) my perception of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignment / Research Context</td>
<td>Data Collection/ Form &amp; Context</td>
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<td>Data Analysis Preview**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research participants also discussed my initial field notes and reflections.</td>
<td>meetings includes audio recordings of each of the 9 conferences with a participant and transcripts of the recordings.</td>
<td>events to reinforce the subjectivity of the participants and establish credibility as defined by Lincoln &amp; Gupta (2006). Transcripts were analyzed through thematic coding (described below).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Final reflections (FRs)**

Individual Assignment - Students were asked to reflect on the course as a whole, their contributions, what they learned, and the switch to online.

These responses were submitted as Word in Blackboard. Three students submitted these reflections.

Students were invited to schedule a virtual meeting with me in addition to or instead of writing these reflections, but no one did.

These reflections were meant as another perception check to ensure credibility and reinforce subjectivity.

The documents were analyzed through thematic coding (described below).

**Follow-up Meetings (FUMs)**

Optional research activity - I invited all student participants to meet with me virtually to discuss the course as a whole and my reflections/ideas on the study following the course.

These optional meetings were held the semester following the course via the internal Blackboard meeting platform, Collaborate.

2 students participated; each meeting lasted just over 20 minutes.

Recordings were

These were one-on-one, instructor / student interactions.

These meetings were intended as final perception checks and as opportunities for students to offer new insights.

Discussion of the course consisted of my prompts / questions about their impressions. Both participants briefly confirmed
### Field Notes / Reflexive Journals

These represent my thoughts as the instructor / researcher while I was conducting the course and then after the course and throughout the analysis and write-up.

These notes and journals were often recorded in real time in Google docs, but others were written on paper and typed up later.

These are individual notes. They do include questions or thoughts to share during MCs and FUMs.

I used these notes primarily to prompt students during MCs and to develop thick descriptions in the write-up.

During phases 4 and 5 (below), these notes allowed me to check for consistency between the themes I had identified in the students’ stories and reflections and my own perceptions of the course experience throughout and following the course.

* Phase 1 (discussed below) included listening to all of the audio recordings, cross referencing them with notes and other data, and identifying speakers. Contributions by non-participants and extended discussions outside of the scope of the data items above were not transcribed.

** I discuss the data analysis process more thoroughly below. This preview is intended to offer a brief snapshot of the analytical affordances of the data from each method and how I approached and used it.
Another Perspective on the Student Data

While the descriptions above offer an overview of the data set as a whole, it is also helpful to consider that the stories that drove the course were introduced by individual students, even when interactions helped develop, clarify, and connect those stories. The NAPs, MCs, FRs, and FUMs represent the primary interactions that I had with the students and their stories. While the stories were born during the NAPs, the other interactions provided opportunities to discuss connections, clarifications, impressions and more. As such, understanding which participants completed each assignment or interaction may better illuminate what the data set meant in terms of the stories. Table 3.2 clarifies which student participants are connected to each data item. Note, however, that during the midterm conferences, final reflections, and follow-up meetings, students more frequently discussed the stories of other participants than their own.

Table 3.2: Data Item* / Student Participant Connections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NAP 1</th>
<th>NAP 2</th>
<th>MC</th>
<th>FR</th>
<th>FUM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lofton</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrence</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis

This analysis adheres to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework for conducting a structured and systematic thematic analysis in six phases:

- Phase 1, familiarizing yourself with the data;
- Phase 2, generating initial codes;
- Phase 3, searching for themes;
- Phase 4, reviewing themes;
- Phase 5, defining and narrating themes; and
- Phase 6, producing the report.

Nowell et al. (2017) extend that framework to incorporate Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research. Within each phase, Nowell et al. identify opportunities to address Lincoln and Guba’s criteria - credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexive audit trails. Table 3.3 provides a brief definition of each trustworthiness criterion and identifies the means I employed to meet the criterion in my analysis.

Table 3.3: Overview of Current Application of Lincoln & Guba’s (1985) Trustworthiness Criteria
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>Credibility refers to the fit between the way the researcher presents data and how participants and readers or co-researchers remember or perceive it.</td>
<td>Perception checks - Presenters were able to take and respond to questions following CAPs and clarify or expand on things in real time and/or later versions. Data collection triangulation - Participants were asked to reflect on class activities and presentations in MCs, FRs, and FUMs. Prolonged engagement with data - reflexive journals during and after the study were compared with other data points and analysis notes, particularly during Phases 1, 2, and 4, allowing me to double check the data when points of analysis matched my previously recorded expectations to ensure consistency.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferability</td>
<td>Because qualitative research is context dependent, decisions about whether findings might transfer to another site or situation are the responsibility of the researchers at that site. However, thick and detailed descriptions of data make these judgements possible.</td>
<td>Thick descriptions - In Phases 1 and 2,* my notes flesh out descriptions from FNs, MCs, and CAPs as I engaged with the data and began thinking about themes and generating codes. Those descriptions informed Phase 5 and are included where relevant in Phase 6*.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependability</td>
<td>Dependability, for qualitative research, comes from clear documentation of logical and transparent choices throughout the process.</td>
<td>Reflexive journaling - This study and the write-up demonstrate reflexivity at every stage. The extended timeframe of engagement with the data provided time to consider what type of analysis best suited the project and to include the thinking that led to those decisions as data in Phase 1 and in the write-up, Phase 6.*The write-up includes reflexive descriptions of the iterative process of analysis as it was informed by writing and reflection as well as the input of the dissertation committee co-chairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmability</td>
<td>Confirmability is about the strength and clarity of the connections between the findings / conclusions and the data. It relies on credibility, transferability, and dependability.</td>
<td>Keeping a data log - In addition to the perception checks, prolonged engagement with the data, thick descriptions, and reflexivity described above, the data log developed as a part of Phase 1 assisted with locating related elements across narratives in Phase 2, diagraming emerging themes in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Criterion | Definition | Means
--- | --- | ---
 |  | Phase 3, data triangulation in Phases 1 and 4, and naming the themes in Phase 5.* The data log became home base for examining the confirmability of the analysis throughout the iterative process.

Reflexive Audit Trails | Audit trails create a clear record of methodological and analytical decisions made throughout the study. These trails should allow another researcher to follow the path and arrive at non-contradictory (though not necessarily identical) conclusions. | Reflection & reflexive journaling - I took field notes throughout the course. When it became clear that campus was not going to reopen, and not all of the student participants were going to be able to remain active, my field notes began to address the implications of that shift. Decisions about course assignments became more about helping students make it through and less about the study. Throughout all 6 phases, I returned to my notes to ensure that my analysis was founded on the data as opposed to my prior thinking. Relevant reflexive elements from the journaling are included in the write-up.

*Phases are described in detail below

Phase 1 - Familiarizing Yourself with Your Data

The purpose of the first phase of a thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2006) is to “immerse yourself in the data to the extent that you are familiar with the depth and breadth of the content” (p. 16). I began thinking about this course in 2016, collecting stories and imagining how it would come together. Then, I designed the course in the fall semester of 2019 as part of the comprehensive exams for this doctoral program. I hijacked the second half of the meeting with my comps committee to discuss what the study would look like. In the spring of 2020, I got an opportunity to teach the course. As the instructor, I was present for every class and conference; I read all assigned materials with the students, even though I’d read them multiple times before; and I responded to all
of the student submissions. In addition, as discussed above, I took field notes throughout the course of the study to keep track of details about conversations and class experiences as well as questions or ideas that occurred to me about connections amongst students’ stories and / or perspectives. After the course ended, I wrestled with the data, thinking about it obsessively and taking notes and drafting and redrafting the first three chapters of this write-up. I lived with the data for more than two years. So, when I made the decision to adopt a thematic analysis approach, I thought Phase 1 was practically finished. I remembered so many moments from the course that had come back to mind time and again. I wanted to simply find them and get on with the analysis, looking for and adding others as needed to flesh out the story of the course. But that impulse was a result of the frustration I had been feeling since I’d realized (in the middle of the study) how drastically the COVID shift was influencing our course experience and the study. The work of Braun and Clarke (2006) and Nowell et al. (2017) helped me focus my thinking in this phase to familiarize myself with the data in the structured and systematic way that thematic analysis requires and that Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert is essential to trustworthiness in qualitative research.

I went back to the data. It was organized into folders by course assignment or event. I had kept it organized in the same way it had been organized in the course gradebook in Blackboard. I reviewed all of the course data to determine which data types were related to the research question and defined the data set as the data types listed above. I created a data log, as Nowell et al. (2017) suggest. The log allowed me to look at the data set all in one place and get a better sense of what I had. In the log, I recorded the data format, the type, the students that were associated with the data (I used
pseudonyms), and notes about anything I remembered about the data item that I thought might be useful during analysis. I recorded in the log additional details (such as the length of audio or video files) and notes about things that seemed interesting on that first review of the thematic analysis process. I began by reading through all of my field notes from during and after the course. In some of them I had recorded initial analytical thoughts on the research and data. I looked to see if the notes I’d added to the data log from my memories of the data matched the reflections in my field notes. Table 3.4 represents a sample slice of the data log, including notes that I added to help me keep my initial thoughts about the different elements straight as I moved into the later phases.
Table 3.4: Sample Slice of Data Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>File Designation</th>
<th>Source (Assignment or Data Type)</th>
<th>Part. (pseudo)</th>
<th>File Type</th>
<th>Length (pages, slides, time)</th>
<th>Pre-Coding Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autobiography Presentations / NAP</td>
<td>Narrative Auto Presentations</td>
<td>Lofton, Marcus, Isaiah</td>
<td>.wav</td>
<td>43:17</td>
<td>L's presentation - surprising, challenging expectations / belonging is more important than prestige or other common markers of quality in terms of school experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiography Presentations / NAP</td>
<td>Narrative Auto Presentations</td>
<td>Mindy</td>
<td>.wav</td>
<td>6:30 (the rest is not data)</td>
<td>M's presentation - focused on balancing act of being a student, chose KSU because it was the closest school and her time was limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiography Presentations / NAP</td>
<td>Narrative Auto Presentations</td>
<td>Leslie &amp; Jasmine</td>
<td>.wav</td>
<td>15:55</td>
<td>Les - I became myself; Jas - father &amp; sports</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During this initial review, I came to realize that the focus and tone of my field notes reflected three different perspectives. In the first eight weeks of the course, my notes captured details of events, conversations with students, and my initial thoughts about the cultural identities or narratives that came through in students’ stories and discussions. These notes were geared toward remembering my experience of the course, the relationships I was developing (or failing to develop) with students, the effectiveness
of class activities, and things I was discovering based on students’ contributions. The reflections and ideas I’d recorded touched on themes to some extent, but also on identifying or searching for recognizable cultural discourse elements in students’ talk. The descriptions of events included context about long pauses and laughter in case I needed help remembering what had happened during transcription.

My notes from the second half of the course, after the COVID lockdown had forced our course online, were much more personal and free-ranging. I recorded thoughts about emails students sent me, concerns about students who had gone silent. I jotted down questions I’d like to explore with the students if and when things went back to normal. Once I realized things were not going to go back to normal, I reflected on the decision I had made to tell everyone that they had all passed and needed to take care of themselves before worrying about our course. I brainstormed ways I could change assignments I’d planned to allow students to complete them without the resources, time, and connections they would have had on campus. In one of the notes, I remarked that three of the students who had been most active and engaged during the first half had gone completely silent and that my study was likely ruined. I took comfort in the fact that after the apocalypse, no one would care if I had my doctorate. I wrote about how hard I was finding it to focus with my children at home all day, needing me to help them complete school online. These notes reflected a focus on getting my students and myself through the semester. Those notes were useful in helping me recognize that much of what happened after the COVID shift was not relevant to my original research questions. There were too many additional factors impacting that data to consider it from the same perspective as the data from the first half of the course.
In my notes from after the course window, my focus was back on the study and how to make sense of the data I had. These notes, I decided, as well as the notes from the second half of the course, were more like the notes Nowell et al. (2017) had discussed when they recommended keeping reflexive journals. I reclassified these notes and looked at them again. They helped me understand why I was not completely crushed when the members of my dissertation committee suggested that a thematic analysis might make more sense than a narrative inquiry or some type of discourse analysis. Considering the many factors, unrelated to a course centering students’ stories influencing what and how students were able to participate after COVID, I agreed. These reflexive journals helped me understand their input and my reaction, and allowed me to incorporate the content in the chapters I had already drafted to illuminate my decisions and thinking along the way, but they were not data for this thematic analysis in the same way they would have been had I moved forward with a narrative inquiry. Table 3.5 presents 2 examples from my notes. The first is from the field notes I took during the first half of the course; it demonstrates a focus on the narrative inquiry I had originally planned, but also reflects my ongoing thinking about the instructional goals of the course. The second example is from the reflexive journals I used after the course to try to sort through my thinking about what had happened.

Table 3.5: From Field Notes to Reflexive Journaling – Example Excerpts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field Notes- During F2F Class (1st Half)</th>
<th>Reflexive Journal – After Class, Before Thematic Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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Class was difficult today. A couple of people (_, and two who are not enrolled) were entirely silent, and others were frustrated by their disagreements about the appropriateness of discussing gender nonconformity with children. __ was adamant about not wanting their niece or future children to be “exposed to that,” showing concern that kids could feel peer pressure to be gay or transgender. Students remained respectful, but __’s propensity is to talk more than listen and take the defensive stance of not wanting to be discriminated against as a straight, cis-gender, Christian. How to help __ grow is going to be a challenge.

Connections that surprised me - K and L saw themselves in one another because they both admired their mothers for doing so much for them as single mothers. M and T both fit in and found community almost immediately at __ after leaving PWIs, but whereas M had never felt like he belonged there, T had fit in and hadn’t realized how he would come to embrace the diversity (and be embraced by it?).

Lives as texts - the strength of a really multicultural classroom in teacher ed prep.

Story as a push towards reflective practice and lifelong learning. The content is not the only thing that’s important. We’re changing the way people see the world, and to do that, we must allow them to see how they change the way we see the world.

Next I read through all of the text-document student assignment submissions -

Three of the NAs included written components. I had hoped to examine those to better understand how students changed or revised their stories over the course of multiple presentations and workshopping sessions, but because students shared live links to those components, it was not clear at what point updates were made. The FRs were written, though only three students submitted them. I added notes about the topics students addressed and ideas about how I saw their points connecting to the research question.
Next I went through the slideshows and visual texts students had shared. I added notes to the log about memorable images or changes from one draft to the next, but ultimately decided that as the visuals had never been intended to stand alone, I would include them in the analysis as they are addressed in the audio recordings and transcripts. Finally, I listened to the audio recordings of class presentations and midterm conferences, and watched the two video recordings of the FUMs. For the audio and video files, I recorded a running index of the topics and interactions, noting the time and summarizing points or quoting text that seemed to capture a perspective really well. I copied notes, including timestamps, that I thought might become important to a theme in the data log. Because the audio recordings included elements like dead air, indecipherable class activity (shuffling of paper, moving of tables, etc.), side conversations of students close enough to the phone to be clear, and the activity of students who had not agreed to be a part of the study, I noted points in the log at which there was no talk or audio to transcribe.

After reviewing the corpus of data of the course, I defined the data set, focusing on the data types that would be relevant to thematic analysis. These included: the stories and interactions that emerged during the presentation and workshopping sessions, or the NAPs; the midterm conferences, final reflections, and follow-up meetings that would allow me to check my perspective with what students thought was going on; Finally, my own field notes and reflexive journals would help me provide thick descriptions and remind me of the iterative process I went through during the analysis. Then, I completed the transcription process. In the years before I’d adopted the structure and method of thematic analysis, I had already transcribed several scenes from the audio files just
because I found them interesting. As discussed above, certain parts of students' stories and interactions during or after presentations had returned to my thinking, even before I had worked out what would be possible with the data. So, I had transcribed them as part of my thinking. After reviewing all of the data, I looked at the transcripts. It was clear that my focus on instances that interested me was too narrow to allow me to recognize the themes across stories. I went back to the audio files and listened again, transcribing the parts of the interactions or events I had left out originally. My transcription process involved slowing the audio playback and focusing on capturing the exact words and phrasing that students used. I did not make corrections to grammar, mostly because I did not find anything particularly difficult to understand, and I did not attempt to use phonetic spellings to indicate students' accents or pronunciation conventions of non-dominant language varieties. Intonation and other audible elements, such as the type or mood of laughter or chatter, I recorded in parenthesis within the transcript when it helped clarify meaning. The only elements that I left out of my transcriptions were dialogue in which I either recognized a student who was not part of the study or in which I could not be sure a speaker was one of the participants. Because the class had been so small and I was intimately familiar with the data, I felt confident in my ability to recognize voices. I reviewed the transcriptions against the index I had created to ensure they matched. Instances of talk preceding or following an event that was included in the data set, namely the presentation or workshopping interactions, as long as they were unrelated to the data item, were also excluded. These include my greetings to students as they entered the class and talk involving getting the computer to work or to connect with the projector.
Phase 2 - Generating Initial Codes

Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend a careful and thorough approach to coding. They note, however, that with theoretical thematic analysis, it is acceptable to “approach the data with specific questions in mind” (Braun and Clarke, p. 18). This is the approach to coding I took. As my research question was broad and fairly open, I broke it into three questions to guide my coding:

- What does this text segment tell me about cultural influences or perceptions of culture?
- How does this text segment relate to story or narrative communication?
- What/how does this text segment reflect learning or understanding?

With these questions in mind, I went through each data item, coding phrases, clauses, or sentences that related to culture; stories or narrative; and learning or understanding. At this point, I highlighted segments of meaning long enough to reflect a connection to the questions, but not necessarily full ideas; I discuss the process of expanding these segments with surrounding context into what Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to as data extracts. When possible, I used exact words or phrases from the text segments as codes.

I coded the transcripts of each data item inside a Google Doc. I cut and pasted the text of the data into the left-hand column. I recorded codes in the right-hand column. When a line had no text to code, I placed an asterisk in the code column. Codes that I felt reflected my interest in culture, I wrote in red; codes that reflected narrative or story, I wrote in green, and codes that reflected learning/understanding, I wrote in blue. I highlighted the text that inspired the code according to the same color scheme.
Coding the data items in this way helped identify how the different data items related to the different parts of the research question. Coding for learning and culture was fairly straightforward - students included direct statements about learning or things they had figured out in the MCs and FRs, and the stories that students crafted for the NAPs were generally focused on or addressed their membership in a cultural community, likely because of the context of the course and the narrative autobiography assignment, as discussed above in the description of the data types.

Still, while students consistently indicated cultural and learning insights explicitly, extracts related to stories were more difficult to identify and code. Students discussed specific stories during their reflections and gave suggestions about the content or form of the stories in the workshopping sessions following the NAPs. These sessions were part of what Wortham and Reyes (2015) call narrating events, as distinguished from narrated events, or the stories themselves. The distinction is important because while the stories reflect experiences and cultural insights of the speaker, the narrating events include extended interactions that reveal implicit insights about storytelling and the collaborative development of stories in community. Thus codes related to story came from both the narrating events and the reflections but did not explicitly talk about story as a curricular element or approach to teaching and learning, as it relates to the research question. Rather, talk that addressed stories in particular most frequently had to do with revision and development suggestions.

**Phase 3 - Searching for Themes**

Phase 3 is about taking codes and seeing how they fit together into themes. Since my process was tied to my research question, I had already coded data segments that
addressed one of the three major topics within my research question. So, I was able to use that to help me collate and look at the codes all in one place. For this, I moved everything into a spreadsheet. In this spreadsheet, I created separate columns for each of the three topics I pulled from my research question to guide my coding (described in phase 2). I labeled these columns topics, and recorded the codes here, next to the column that contained the data extracts. I also included columns for the file name of the artifact, data item type, and the participant (the person who submitted the artifact or was presenting). However, some of my coded data extracts involved interactions during or after presentations. For interactions, I created a column to record the other speakers. Table 3.6 represents the spreadsheet format from this initial organizing of the codes.

**Table 3.6 Initial Code Organization**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artifact/ File Name</th>
<th>Data Item Type</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Data Extract</th>
<th>Codes by Topic</th>
<th>Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Second</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, as I moved the text segments, I expanded on them when necessary to reflect their discussion of data extracts that “keep a little of the surrounding data, if relevant” to address the common critique that coding removes too much context (p. 89). In the line-by-line coding, I had recorded the code beside the line with the key word or phrase that defined the idea for me, and I had highlighted sometimes short phrases, and other times whole clauses or sentences to indicate what I was considering “coded.” So, at this point, as I moved the text extracts, I tried to ensure that each extract included enough context to indicate not only the connection of the segment of text to an aspect of the research question, but also to illuminate how the segment related to the story, reflection, or learning experience from which it was pulled. I made sure that I included the whole idea, when possible, so that I would understand the
context when I reviewed the text excerpts for each theme for consistency and clarity, as discussed below. The topic columns helped me begin thinking about patterns between the topics. At some points in the initial coding, I’d marked questions about revisions or developments in story content as relevant to “story.” Those became clear when first and second presentation extracts were examined in close proximity. This made understanding and naming the themes more complex, so it is discussed more fully in the next phase, but because this code sheet with the initial codes and questions was the point to which I returned to work through challenges during the analysis, it is important to note that the tensions between what I’d conceived, in the course design, as “the stories” and what I’d considered “the workshopping sessions” emerges from the initial coding process. The code sheet became an essential living document throughout the analysis. I returned to it, and to the work of phase 3, when I was stuck or struggling to understand or incorporate feedback from my mentors, adding new columns of notes as needed to record my thoughts and questions.

From here, I completed a card sort of the codes from each topic. First, I sorted the cards to determine which codes within each topic belonged together. Once I had those piles sorted, I looked again to see which codes, if any, might be themes or categories in their own right and which piles would need to be categorized under a theme that had not been a code. Finally, within the topics, I looked for connections among the

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This card sort was a modification of the pile sorting technique described by Bernard (2006) as a way to structure an interview. The technique allows participants to organize index cards or slips of paper with words, or in my case, phrases, into groups that “belong together.” Braun and Clarke (2006) include condensing codes into categories in phase 3, and because I had originally coded with specific aspects of the RQ in mind (culture, story, and learning), the modified pile sort technique allowed me to think about which codes went together on their own merit, as way to mitigate the influence of my initial impressions of the data’s connection to the RQ.
categories/themes. I kept notes as I completed this process, identifying both new categories and those that were already codes but would serve as categories or tentative themes. My next step was to complete a card sort of the tentative themes across topics. I labeled the categories from this card sort tentative themes as well. I looked for overlap in themes that would allow me to combine or otherwise refine themes. I noticed that segments I’d coded as relevant to “story” almost all related to the craft of storytelling - revision suggestions - that led to further development of the content of the stories, coded as “culture” in most cases. I noted the tension but continued following the process. Finally, I created a thematic map of the tentative themes and sub-themes.

The thematic map is meant to visually represent the connections that were made during the process of condensing codes and to provide a bird’s eye view of the themes and their connections to one another. Like the code sheet, the thematic map was part of the process described by Braun and Clarke (2006) that I completed more from a compulsion to follow the steps accurately than from any notion that it would be helpful to me. I have never felt particularly drawn to infographics or graphic organizers, so I tried to be thoughtful and accurate, but felt like the map was more of a product of my analysis than part of the process. However, also like the code sheet, the thematic map, or maps considering the many times I returned to and updated it, became essential to my process of both learning about thematic analysis and conducting this one. The map helped ground me in the results of my review of the data and the search for themes. As discussed again in phase 4 below and more fully in chapter 4, I returned to the map to revise and rethink each time I recognized a disconnect between my analysis and what I’d identified in the data.
Phase 4 - Reviewing Themes

As described by Braun and Clarke (2006), this phase plays out in two levels of review of each tentative theme. The first step is a review of the data extracts included in each theme. The goal is to ensure the theme is cohesive or internally valid and that the theme reflects the complexity of the data it describes. When I encountered data extracts that did not fit, I considered their fit within other themes and moved them if possible. If a theme seemed too narrow to suit the data extracts, I modified the theme. Upon moving data or refining themes, I refined the thematic map. Once each theme clearly reflected and described the data extracts within it, I moved on to level two. This involved reviewing the entire data set to ensure that the themes clearly reflected the big picture. It also provided another opportunity to add or refine codes upon another listen, and to refine themes that way. I returned to this process for multiple attempts, primarily because of the tensions I touch on in the phases above between what I had coded as thematically relevant to “story” and the coded segments that reflected updates or changes to story content through workshopping and multiple presentations. The thematic map was updated during each iteration.6

Phase 5 - Defining and Naming Themes

This is a storytelling phase, and it provides an opportunity to really examine the essence of the final themes and their connections to the data. In this phase, I worked from the final themes that I developed in phase 4. I looked at each theme and reviewed the data

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6 The implications and reflexive discussion of the various interactions are included in the findings and discussion as pertinent. Appendix II presents the progression of multiple drafts or versions of the thematic map that I developed before ultimately capturing the map that guides chapter 4.
extracts connected to it. I worked those data extracts into a cohesive story of the theme. In my first attempt, I found that in moving from the categories and subcategories for each of the three points of thematic interest—culture, stories, and learning—to the final “name” or definition of the theme, which I developed as statements that told the story of the data included there, I had allowed my prior focus on critical narrative analysis to influence how I was reading the data. I noticed in phase 6 that explaining the connections between the themes I had defined and the raw data, particularly the data from the stories about cultural identification, I was falling back on analysis of “how” as opposed to “what” was said. Moving back though phases 3, 4, and 5 to reconcile that discrepancy is discussed more fully in Chapter 5. Ultimately, the essential role of safety as a driver that supported and facilitated the development of the themes represents the changes and developments to the essential story data with the overall themes that reflect the research question’s focus on the potential affordances of story in relation to cultural understanding.

**Phase 6 - Producing the Report**

Phase 6 is the process of creating an “analytic narrative to illustrate the complex story of the data, going beyond a description of the data and convincing the reader of the validity and merit of the analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While the examples Braun and Clarke (2006) and Nowell et al. (2017) provided generally refer to findings or results sections for this phase, as the longer form of the dissertation allows, this phase guides the findings and conclusions chapters, but also the going back to chapters that had been previously drafted to add reflexivity and detail about the methodological decisions and the context that surrounded them along the way. In addition to the reflexive details to illuminate my decision-making throughout and writing the analytical narrative based on
the phases described above, phase 6 also included tying back to the literature that informed the course and study design to more thoroughly represent the influences of that scholarship on my thinking throughout.

Working through the six phases of thematic analysis provided me with an opportunity to see an experience I’d lived through and reflected on for years, as well as the body of data that resulted from that experience, with new eyes. The process allowed me to focus on the students’ voices and what telling their stories allowed them to discover and express. I maintain that what the students did in this course with their language is important and fascinating. But this thematic analysis method and approach has also shown me that what the students were able to do with their stories has a power of its own. This analysis reveals that inviting students into the classroom as co-teachers and their stories as content encourages a focus on their situated cultural perspectives–their subjectivity and what it is their stories have to say. The what of the students’ stories as well as the telling of them drive the discussion of findings in chapter 4.
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS– LOOKING WITH NEW EYES

When I started my MAT program, I had never thought seriously of being a teacher. My daughter had just turned one, and I realize now that I must have been exhausted from dealing with my consistently high anxiety and the lingering postpartum depression that I couldn’t quite kick. I hadn’t left our studio apartment except for one week-long visit home to my parents’ house and to take my daughter to her doctor’s appointments since she’d been born. I hadn’t let her sleep for more than 30 minutes at a time without poking her to make sure she was still alive. I was six hours from my family, except for my husband who didn’t know any more than I did and was working long hours so I could stay home. He worked nights and slept during the day, in the “bedroom nook” of our studio apartment. Only one of my college friends was still in the city, and she was single with no kids. I was terrified and felt like I was failing at something I didn’t even understand. I don’t even remember applying for the M.A.T. program, but I think I just knew that I was losing my mind, yellow wallpapering myself, and that I had to do something. I needed a new narrative.

Like most people, I had some motherhood narratives to work with. Sadly, by the standards of all of those, I was garbage. I was scared and sad all the time; I didn’t know any of the answers to any of life’s big questions, and one time during one of her 15-minute naps, I climbed out my window onto the porch roof to smoke a cigarette, and my baby rolled off the bed. But I was a mom, or that was the story I was telling myself. And once I had cast myself in the story, I started seeing everything through that lens. It turned
out that some of those mom narratives had some promising bits. New moms were nervous in jokes and sitcoms, so maybe being chronically unsure was fine. My baby was fat and alive after nearly a year with me, so maybe I was just a mom who was focused on the fundamentals. I’d be one of those snacks-in-the-purse moms once she was big enough to eat purse snacks, and I could convince myself to leave the house. I’d be a practical mom who shunned competitive parenting trends. I remembered my own mom telling the story of my cousin visiting us when he was young. He’d gotten his shorts muddy outside and came in to change. He had explained to my mom what happened, and she’d said, “No problem. Just go change your shorts.” He was confused.

“You mean I don’t have to change my shirt?” he’d asked.

“Is your shirt dirty?”

“No… but it won’t match my other shorts.”

“Oh. Well, I don’t care if your shorts and shirt match,” my mom had said. “Do you?”

“No!” my ecstatic cousin had exclaimed. He had changed into the first clean shorts he could find and fairly bounced back outside to play in the glow of his newfound freedom from my aunt’s fashion-fueled oppression. At least that’s how my mom told it. I could tell my own story too. I would never have to worry that I couldn’t keep up with outfit sets and shoes that matched. I just didn’t have time to worry about such silly things. Too busy momming.

The story I was crafting did help me feel better sometimes, especially when I got the chance to tell it to someone else. But it also helped me figure things out and make decisions. Moms have to leave the house; moms work sometimes, but not horrible hours–
that ruled out going back to the retail job where I’d been killing time before law school. Unfortunately, it also ruled out law school, at least in my mind. And my mind was where the story lived. It didn’t have to be true, and it didn’t have to be consistent. I didn’t even have to remember all the parts. It just had to help me wrap my head around whatever baffling or paralyzing thing I was facing at the moment. So when I saw the acceptance letter to the MAT program, it didn’t matter that I couldn’t remember applying. Going made sense in my story. I was a mom, and being a teacher was something a mom would totally do. Just as Proust famously noted that discovery was not in seeing new sights, but rather looking with new eyes, the stories I crafted for myself about motherhood allowed me to consider my life and experiences with new eyes.

**Storying a Course Experience - Mapping the Themes**

The notion of using stories to see and understand ourselves and our lives in new ways comes through in the thematic analysis of this course as well. As the research question suggests, the course was devoted to crafting, sharing, revising, and retelling stories to see what that might reveal about culture. Based on this question, the collaborative, iterative approach to story development and storytelling fostered by the course design plays an important role in recognizing and understanding the potential and impact of the stories.

The corpus of data from this course includes a wealth of interesting and linguistically rich stories and discourse events that may represent opportunities for future analyses. This theoretical thematic analysis, however, affords a high-level perspective of the connections between the data and the research question. Further, Nowell et al.’s (2017) integration of an established, systematic approach to analysis with proven
trustworthiness criteria offers an opportunity to guard against unintentional biases that might otherwise arise from the researcher's embedded position in the study or preconceived notions about culture, stories, and learning. The thematic map represented in figure 4.1, developed in phases 3 and 4 of the analysis serves as a guide to both the content and structure of this chapter. The combination and analysis of the data extracts related to culture produced a defined, unifying theme that describes what the patterns and highlights in the data suggest can be learned in a story-based course about culture.

The primary theme reflects the big picture of the analysis and captures what the course data reveal about the research question. It is centrally located in the map in the red node. Directly connected to the primary theme node are the secondary themes that emerged from the combining of the codes and data extracts that were identified in the course data. That relationship repeats at the next level down, and in the case of the secondary theme of “Family,” the process repeats a final time until all relevant codes or code combinations that do not fit a thematic node at the current level are represented as subtheme nodes at the level below. Each level is identified visually both spatially and through a change in color at each thematic level or generation. The one exception to this organization scheme is the thematic driver—safety, which is presented here as an equal node to the primary theme. But it is not properly a theme that was derived from the data. Rather, as I describe more fully below, safety appeared in the process, rather than the content, of the content. It was most obvious during coding and analysis as an important aspect of the course that participants discussed in their midterm and final reflections, but once their reflections made it clear, safety is part of the stories both in how the collaborative experiences of story crafting played out as well as in changes and
developments to the stories. It wasn't so much a theme of the stories but rather a relational prerequisite in the class community that drove the individual and collaborative development and sharing of the vast majority of the data such that using students’ stories as content for the course could not have played out as it did in this study, without the safety that the students so valued in the class community. As such it is presented prominently on the map. Likewise, the importance of safety is developed in a section preceding the illumination of the themes in the story data.

Figure 4.1 - Thematic Map

The map depicts the generational relationships of the primary and secondary themes and the topic categories that arose from the stories in the course and that define those themes. I consider the primary theme, culture is complex and dynamic, and the secondary themes involving family, diversity, and agency as “themes,” and the levels below those as “topic categories.” I made this decision based on my working definition of
theme as it is used in literary analysis, as distinct from topic, in that a theme is a reflection of a larger statement that the text makes about a topic. This perspective is consistent with how Braun and Clarke (2019) define themes, in their reflections on how their approach to thematic analysis has been taken up, “as stories about particular patterns of shared meaning across the dataset” (p. 592). They distinguish this conceptualization of themes from “domain summaries,” which aim to describe “the range of meaning in the data related to a particular domain of discussion” (p. 592). While “family,” “diversity,” and “agency as repositioning7” are shortened in the map for the sake of formatting, each represents a story involving that topic that the data across stories (and reflections) tells when taken together. At the next levels, the categories simply reflect recurring codes. Safety is presented at the sibling level to the primary theme, but the connection between the two is stronger than the other sibling-level relationships in the map. This is because safety acts as a driver that is connected to the primary theme because of its direct connections to the stories.

The rest of this chapter is organized according to the major elements of the map. As the subjectivity of the storytellers was essential to the course and study design, the findings are presented within the stories that most clearly illustrate the themes. Relations between stories, or segments of stories, are also presented in relation to each theme to demonstrate how the themes represent the connections amongst stories, storytellers, and

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7 All three secondary themes are described more fully below. However, while the other two are presented as single words, because the subtheme “agency as repositioning” was more difficult to condense, even into a phrase, I will preview it here. This conception of agency relies on Bandura’s (2001) notion that “Personal agency operates within a broad network of sociostructural influences” (p. 1). Briefly, in exploring cultural perspectives and knowledge, agency as repositioning reflects an individual’s autonomy to act in a way that challenges one or more aspects of a cultural identity by shifting or changing orientations within or in relation to another.
perspectives that the course illuminated. As many of the stories connected and overlapped to reveal multiple themes, a story that is presented or discussed in one section may reappear again when relevant.

First, Leslie, Lofton, and Jasmine’s stories are presented to illustrate three ways that safety has driven the development of the students' stories and understanding of the data. The remainder of the chapter examines the themes and how they were identified through the analysis. That thematic exploration begins with an overview of three additional “essential stories,” which, along with those discussed in the safety section, most fully illustrate the development of the themes. The sub sections focus on the patterns within the stories that students shared and co-developed that revealed the themes as described in the map above. Ultimately, the primary theme, that culture is complex and dynamic, is presented as the synthesis of three secondary themes involving family, diversity, and agency, all of which were developed, clarified, or brought to light due, in part, to the safety of the community environment in the course.

**Backseat Driver - The Importance of Safety in Learning from Stories**

The primary sources of cultural content in this course and study were students' stories. As established in chapter 3, they developed these stories for the Narrative Autobiography Presentation (NAP) assignment. The NAP was conceived as the major assignment as well as an essential component of the curriculum. Students were to develop their stories over time with the help and collaboration of their classmates in feedback sessions. The first presentations took place in the first three weeks of the course. Nine of the ten participants presented a first draft of their story. The second presentations were planned for weeks seven and nine, before and after spring break. As students did not
return to campus after spring break, three of the nine students who had presented a first
draft were unable to present a second draft. Still, while the shift in the course prevented
us from “completing” these stories as was planned in the syllabus, participants’ midterm
and final reflections consistently referred to both the stories themselves and the
collaborative development of the stories as essential to their learning in the course.
Students consistently noted that teaching and learning from each other and that the
general openness and willingness to share were what made those experiences powerful.
These reflections, as well as those that explicitly mentioned safety, suggested that safety
comprised several components, among those, our approach to sharing power and
expertise in the course and the shared engagement with one another’s personal stories.
That feedback led me to look at the stories for instances where teaching and learning
from each other and openness or willingness to share / vulnerability were at play. Such
instances demonstrate the importance of safety. While it did not clearly or consistently
appear within the semantic codes or topics in the stories, it was evident in how the stories
developed, either through shared inquiry that brought students more closely together or
over time as students became more comfortable with one another. Safety was also evident
in its absence when a story’s content became too personal for students to feel confident in
their ability to collaborate on it. Three stories illustrate the driving force of safety for the
learning in this course.

Lofton and Leslie were among the students who presented twice, and in both
cases but in different ways, the additional presentations and collaborative workshopping
sessions provide insight into the driving influence of safety on the development and
sharing of the content of the stories. Jasmine’s only presentation and workshopping
session, as she did not get the opportunity to present a second time, provides insight on the influence of safety on collaborative engagement with a story’s emotionally challenging content. While all of these stories are important to illuminating different themes and subthemes in the discussion below, they are presented here more fully to illustrate the cruciality of safety in supporting the development of and engagement with the stories, the data that defined the course experience, and this thematic analysis.

**Collaborative Story Development and a Safe House - Insights from Leslie’s Story**

Leslie had a kind smile and a soft voice. Judging by demeanor alone, she would have appeared timid. So when her soft voice demanded, “What is the point of what you’re trying to do here?” of a classmate who had just presented the first draft of a story, the moment stood out. And that is not to say that Leslie was rude or insensitive to the storyteller; she was simply direct and focused on figuring out this open-ended assignment she had been given. She understood the directive to choose a topic that was culturally significant to her, but she was not sure how to approach writing for a class in a narrative form. Her mind was in exposition mode. And, when that classmate’s workshopping session was finished, Leslie volunteered to go next. It was the second day of the first round of presentations, and Leslie wanted her classmates’ help. Her presentation and workshopping session demonstrate that shared or collaborative inquiry and story development may promote a sense of safety that can allow participants to put traditional or institutional power imbalances aside temporarily to interact as equals. Pratt (1991) describes “safe houses,” as “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogenous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression” (p. 40). The
collaborative engagement with and development of Leslie’s story demonstrate how the class community came together as an inquiry group exploring culture and storytelling to create a sort of safe house.

Leslie’s cultural autobiography focused on her journey from processed or straightened to natural hair. On her way to the front of the classroom to present, she mentioned that she would be needing a lot of help. Leslie’s entire presentation before her classmates began offering input consisted of a brief overview of her idea accompanied by a slideshow with several snapshots of her hair at different ages:

Ok so I was gonna talk about my hair experience as a young black girl. Like having relaxers, like straightening your hair and stuff like that. So like when I was younger, I had like long, kinda straight hair. So when I got into middle school, middle school my hair started breaking off cause I started doing my own hair. So it's like this is like freshman year, 8th grade year, so then I cut all my hair off. So I was kinda gonna like explain how transitioning to like natural hair and stuff like that. Curly hair.

Leslie’s acknowledgement of the need for help set the stage for the productive workshopping session that followed. As simple as that idea is, in many contexts, it is not acceptable to ask people questions about their lives or cultures. Curiosity can be both conceived and perceived as othering, a post-colonial theoretical concept that explores ways colonizers may discuss and portray non-dominant cultures to distinguish them from the dominant, civilized culture. And even when someone has a genuine and well-intentioned interest in another person’s experiences or culture, outside of an established relationship, asking questions of individuals instead of seeking out relevant research and
media puts the work of educating on those who already know instead of on those who would like to learn. This is problematic in learning about different cultures in particular because as cultures are not valued equally in a multicultural society, the work of explaining or teaching about culture falls disproportionately on those whose cultural wealth is least valued. However, the brevity and form of Leslie’s presentation and her direct request for input made the workshop space safe for shared inquiry and collaboration, as the exchange immediately following Leslie’s presentation demonstrates:

Kristine: I have a question. I'm a white girl and don't know what any of this is.

(Kristine laughs, and several students laugh with her in a friendly way.)

Leslie: Okay so umm. Okay so, Black girls, so we, our hair is thick and curly, so, when we was younger we got relaxers.

Kristine: What is that?

Leslie: Okay do you know what a perm is?

Kristine: Yeah? (her tone is upturned, as though she still doesn’t understand the connection)

Leslie: Don't you (turns to include me in the question), like don't white people use perms?

Leah: We do, but when white people get perms, they put curlers in and then they -

Leslie: (turns back to Kristine) So it makes y'all's curly but it makes ours straight.

Kristine: Oooh!

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8 Italicized parentheticals in segments of transcribed text are my notes and were added during transcription with the help of cross referencing from class field notes where relevant.
Leslie: Yeah.

Kristine’s comment and question broke the ice in this instance, sparking a discussion that drew more students in as it went. The function of the comment in the moment was to offer an approach to providing feedback from the place of an interested listener rather than as an expert offering a critique. This approach broke the ice because offering feedback on a peer’s work represents what Brown and Levinson (1978) would call a face-threatening act (FTA), that can feel like a breach of the politeness that generally governs classroom interactions amongst students. In Pratt’s (1991) terms, Kristine’s question began the work of creating a “safe house” with students becoming a group of cross-cultural storytellers, working to make implicit cultural understandings explicit in their narratives. Kristine mitigated her implicit critique that necessary context or background was missing from Leslie’s story by acknowledging that rather than being incomplete, the story relied on cultural understandings that Kristine did not have access to from her own experience. Thus, Leslie’s expertise on her story was unquestioned, but listeners were invited to consider their own understandings to suggest additions or further development. This positioning becomes important throughout the workshopping session.

Leslie took up and developed the same technique when she asked, “[D]on’t white people use perms?” This moment demonstrated an acknowledgement of the different cultural knowledge pools from which listeners might draw. She had used the term “relaxer,” both in her overview and when she began responding to Kristine, but her shift to the term “perm” demonstrated her understanding of the overlap in cultural practices and terminology between white and Black women’s hair care. Just as Kristine recognizes her complete lack of knowledge as a white woman about Leslie’s hair experience, Leslie
is aware of some uncertainty about some elements of white beauty culture. She knows that perms are something that white women are likely to recognize, but she is not certain of the details or distinctions between the way Black and white women use the term or the process. Her knowledge about white hair is comparatively higher than Kristine’s knowledge about Black hair, which makes sense considering that the more dominant a culture is, the more competence outsiders need in order to function within and around it. As Delpit (1988) states, “[S]uccess in institutions—schools, workplaces, and so on— is predicated on the acquisition of the culture of those who are in power” (p. 283).

Jasmine, a student who identifies as biracial, Black and white, joins the conversation after Leslie connects her own hair experience to white and Black hair knowledge at large. As Kristine asks questions about how Leslie’s hair was damaged, the conversation turns to another point of connection between white and Black hair culture—the use of heat for styling. Leslie blames her hair damage on straightening her hair every day. Kristine, whose hair is curly, straightens her hair daily without issue. Jasmine explains: “No, you can't put heat on your hair everyday. That's why they have like, heat protectors.” In this moment, Jasmine contributes unasked, confirming that cultural knowledge, in addition to individual experience, is at play here. Likewise, her use of the casual generic “you” in this instance is not intended to refer to Kristine, but rather to Black women in general, at once demonstrating the communal nature of cultural knowledge and providing access to that knowledge community to Kristine, at least temporarily. Further, Jasmine makes the knowledge confirmable or researchable for Kristine by referencing Black hair care products that are widely available. In this way, Kristine gets access to new perspectives on a familiar topic as well as an idea about how
to learn more if she would like to do so. Leslie is able to confirm and expand her general understanding of cultural differences on her topic to help her decide what details and exposition to add to her story for a culturally diverse audience. The collaborative development of Leslie’s story provides class participants with a point of connection with an extensive body of scholarship on the cultural significance of Black women’s hair. While Leslie’s story is discussed further below as important in illustrating multiple themes from this analysis, the lasting impact and importance of the sense of safety established in this exchange that happened so early in the course become more evident in the way Lofton’s story develops from his first presentation and workshopping session to the next.

_Safety and Story Development over Time - Insights from Lofton’s Story_

Although he was among the few students to present twice, Lofton’s story unfolds more incrementally than two presentations might suggest. While his first draft, pre-planned and written out, established the basic structure of the story, his presentation style was such that the story as a whole was largely developed as it unfolded in real time. He began engaging the audience almost immediately during his presentation, disregarding “time for questions at the end” tradition. Interestingly, Lofton was one of the first people in the class to present his story. He had not been present for the first two classes, but upon hearing the assignment, he expressed an idea immediately and was ready to present it by the next class. It was the fourth class meeting for everyone else, but it was Lofton’s

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9 In 1892, in her book _A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South_, Anna Julia Cooper, an educator and sociologist, wrote about the ways Black women’s hair has been used to define and control them, defining a field of scholarship that is still going strong over 130 years later.
second day, and the class session before Leslie’s safe-house worthy presentation described above.

Lofton shared the story of his experiences in a private, white elementary school, a diverse public middle school, and a public, historically Black high school. Lofton’s story connects to a rich body of writing by Black authors who have attended predominantly white private schools, but his first draft avoids the honest scrutiny of the experience that is generally evident in writing on the topic.10 Near the beginning, he discussed his popularity at the private school and included that he stood out from his classmates as “one of one and a half” Black people. He elaborated in response to his classmates’ laughter, “Yeah, we had one light-skinned girl, and it was me.” Overall, his message about the private school in the first draft was that he liked the people and they liked him, but he loved his historically Black high school and fit in better there. Pointing to a picture of the high school in his slideshow, he declared, “best high school in America right here!” And went on to show a YouTube video of his senior class dance—a loud and celebratory event in his high school gym. The audio recording of the presentation at that time sounds like a party, and it is difficult to distinguish the sounds in the video from the enthusiasm of the class.

Lofton was entertaining throughout his presentation, but he shared few details about why he described his elementary school experience as “eye opening” and “a culture shock,” focusing instead on the things he liked about each school he attended. His focus

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10 Perry (1998), McClane (2009), and Pendleton (2019) are just a few of the Black authors who have shared the stories of their experiences at white private schools. Lofton’s feeling of isolation is consistent with this body of literature. Interestingly, his story does not include descriptions of critical incidents of painful experiences, but rather focuses on the emotional impact of the mismatch between his cultural identity and the culture of the school community.
on the positive aspects of each experience relates to Canagarajah’s (1997) study of Black
students in a college writing course, who before they developed a sense of community,
had a tendency to “represent themselves in academically favorable identities” (p. 178).
So, while Lofton’s first draft acknowledges his shortcomings in middle school, the
narrative arc culminates in his stand-out success in high school where he became a leader
and decided to go to college.

When the class asked questions during the first workshopping session, he
elaborated somewhat, describing the distance from his community, “I was inner city and
had to drive 45 minutes to elementary.” He also touched upon the academic rigor of the
school:

   It was a whole new system I was learning. When I was in third grade, I learned
6th grade, 7th grade stuff, so it was just hard for me to catch up. Also with the
culture shock of the people I was around. Which I grew up an inner-city kid. So I
was, you know I had a culture shock very young.

In both responses, he reuses the terms like “inner city” and “culture shock” that he’s been
asked to describe, in place of details about his experience. This drawing upon tropes that
exist in dominant perspectives resembles a narrative approach that Pratt (1991) identifies
as “an autoethnographic text,” or “a text in which people undertake to describe
themselves in ways that engage with representations that others have made of them” (p.
35). This is one technique of a “contact zone,” which Pratt describes as a learning space
where cultures crash into one another and no one is safe (p. 34).

By the time Lofton presents his second draft, it is week 5 of the course. He has
seen everyone else present at least once, including the safe house presentation and
workshopping session above, and he has offered feedback and input on the stories of others. In coding the data set, data extracts from both of Lofton’s presentation and workshopping sessions were pulled and coded. Placing the extracts that addressed the same points of his story next to one another in the data log brought the differences sharply into focus. His second presentation reflects notable differences that suggest that he has developed a sense of trust in the course community that allows him to feel safe in exploring more difficult or personal perspectives. For instance, he had originally shared, “I grew up in a single parent household with a hardworking queen,” noting that his mother had kept him in lots of sports. He elaborated on this segment of the story in his second presentation:

Honestly, it was hard being in a home where I only had a mother, because some of those lessons and values a father are supposed instill in his son wasn’t instilled in me. In result, I was forced to teach myself everything my sperm donor was supposed to teach me through trial and error. My mother tried everything possible to make up for his absence. Ms. __ kept me in sports all my life.

These insights may simply reflect the suggestion he got from Leslie after his first presentation to “add more of what the experience meant to you,” but they may also reflect his willingness to share more deeply once we’d developed a safe house or sense of community in the course. The latter is supported by his decision to share, near the end of his second presentation, the reason he ultimately left the private school. Whereas in his first presentation he said, “I didn't have any problems at - I didn't have any problems. It's just the fact that it cost too much. So after a while, mom was like, ahh, you gonna have to go to public school. It cost too much, so.” During his second presentation, however, as
he was showing a picture of the private school, Lofton decided to tell another version of the story: “I actually got - I’m gonna add that in my final too - I actually got kicked out here.” When class members reacted with surprise, he went on:

Lofton: Um. I'll tell you all. I was just, I'm a person who like to have fun and it's not the time for that all the time. So, me being 5th grade I would just do s-, just random - I don't know. Just stuff that just wasn't. They just wasn't having it. Like I was. I don't even know. Some of the stuff I would do, like, throw stuff, joke around, supposed to be in science class, but it was like, open, so it's like I'm supposed to be in science class but I would walk through campus and go to the gym. Just stuff. I don't. They would always be looking for me. Just I don't know. I never did nothin too too bad. Just I was always doing something.

Lofton does not push back against the school’s position in the dominant discourse, but he does work to qualify and develop his sense of his own behavior. While he acknowledges that his behavior deviates from the school’s expectations, he also acknowledges that nothing he did was terribly bad, thus complicating the relationship between his own narrative and the dominant tropes he incorporated early on. The willingness to challenge these narratives directly, as opposed to using an autoethnographic text, reflects a shift in Lofton’s sense of safety in the community.

**Challenging Topics and Engagement - Insights from Jasmine’s Story**

Jasmine’s story is about honoring the legacy of her father’s devotion to his family and community. She comes from a happy home and identifies as biracial, with a white mother and a Black father. She discusses her father’s importance in her life before she lost him to gun violence 2 years before. Her father was her coach, first in basketball, and
later in volleyball as well. He was very involved in youth sports in their community, and her whole family has a legacy of athletic achievement at the high school she attended. So, she decided to honor his memory by creating a scholarship program and holding a community sports event in his name. Her story connects family pride and legacy with agency in the way she decided to understand and respond to her loss by creating something beautiful, and in this way relates to scholarship linking Black women’s grief and pain to their social activism.\textsuperscript{11}

Jasmine’s story speaks to safety in two ways. First, her willingness and ability to share this story demonstrates her feeling of comfort and safety in the class. In her midterm reflection, she mentioned being surprised that she had decided to tell that story in particular, as she had never spoken about her father’s death in public. And despite the difficulty of the topic, the story is both well developed and culturally significant.

However, despite its power and relevance, the sensitivity of the topic also presents a threat to safety in some ways. When Jasmine was finished presenting her story, the room went completely silent. Whereas the general routine that had emerged following presentations involved sharing feedback and/or applause or questions almost immediately. But no one felt comfortable starting the workshopping session after Jasmine’s story. And when the feedback did ultimately begin, it primarily took the form of compliments and questions about how the scholarship program was coming along, a topic that is not featured in Jasmine’s story.

\textsuperscript{11} Al’Uqdah & Adomako (2018) provide an overview of this topic and Celeste (2018) explores a different but related topic of Black women’s history of public mourning to expose injustice.
Further, while Jasmine’s story is featured here in light of its importance in the development of the cultural themes below, there were three stories in the set that focused on the death of a loved one. The danger of the topic is supported by similar silences and timidity at the beginning of the workshopping sessions of the two other student stories that featured a loss as well. Interestingly as the second workshopping session of Carol’s story progressed (Carol was the only one of the loss stories that was presented a second time), the feedback and development suggestions did get more constructive. So, while Jasmine’s storytelling experience did not fall prey to the danger of personal trauma sometimes associated with the use of trauma narratives outside of clinical settings (Carello & Butler, 2014), the topic did likely interrupt the safety of the workshopping session by reintroducing the hesitancy to critique a personal story that had been mitigated by the safety of shared cultural inquiry. Whether additional presentations of the same story would have eased the tension associated with discussing the story, this study does not have the data to determine.

**Themes from a Diverse Safe House - Culture is Complex and Dynamic**

Students’ stories ranged in topic from school experiences, to motherhood, to childhood homes, to the loss of loved ones. Despite the breadth of topics, however, students’ stories all addressed the storytellers’ cultural group membership in some way, as the assignment directed, and the connection did not end there.

Patterns in content or narrative elements like plot, characters, and settings also emerged. These patterns are important because narrative choices reflect what Hiles (2007) refers to as “matterings,” as they are necessarily interpretive and provide insight into what the storyteller deems important (p. 36). Thus, stories or narratives about culture
are valuable not because they reveal objective truths about static phenomena, but rather because they provide insights about what the storytellers perceive to matter in their own experiences. As Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) assert of learning about culture from narratives, “the object of study is not the “true” event, as it might have been recorded by some panel of disinterested observers, but the construction of that event within a personal and social history” that reveals “the more or less abiding concerns and constraints of the individual and his or her community” (p. 4). Thus, one benefit of conducting a thematic analysis on a data set that includes a variety of cultural perspectives, henceforth “patterning the matterings,” is the potential to identify trends or motifs in cultural perspectives on similar topics across stories or situations. The trends allow elements to be condensed under a more generalized category at the next level.

That the points of connection in this data set appeared across stories of membership in different cultural groups could suggest several things. It may be that different cultures overlap in relation to a topic, or that an individual is navigating multiple cultural identities or influences, or that a member of one cultural group has simply adopted a culturally inconsistent perspective on a topic. Points of conflict or tension between stories involving similar cultures may likewise reflect multiple situations. But the repetitions and patterns, regardless of the direct causes of overlap or divergence, suggests that cultural systems are not rigid, monolithic, or static, operating in the same way or to predictable effect on every individual. Rather, patterns that relate to culture
within the data of this study reveal the theme that as it is lived and understood by
individuals, culture is complex and dynamic.\textsuperscript{12}

This theme about culture reflects a big picture supported by the data. The themes
have been developed from the data of students’ stories. Analysis of their presentations
and story workshopping sessions provided the cultural thematic content, and the
reflection assignments provided opportunities to explore students’ perceptions of the
stories and class to confirm the consistency of the results of the analysis with the
participants’ perceptions. The patterns that emerge at the different levels of analysis, as
demonstrated in the thematic map (Fig. 4.1), illustrate the path from raw data at ground
level to the primary theme, the highest level of thematic abstraction or generalization
considered in this analysis. Table 4.1 presents a more linear view of one of the
relationship pathways from raw data, to codes, to categories to secondary themes, and
finally, to the primary theme. It includes examples from the data and analysis at each
level.

The table represents one pathway from data to primary theme by way of the
secondary theme of diversity. It mirrors the color scheme from the thematic map with one
exception. The other secondary themes, family and agency, are presented in a lighter tint
and in typeface that is not bold. This is meant to give visual prominence to the elements
that make up the example diversity pathway, and to reiterate that the selected pathway is
one of many that led from data to primary theme. Each level above the raw data excerpts

\textsuperscript{12} The complex and dynamic nature of culture is not a new, innovative, or even contentious
idea. The relevance of the theme abides not in its message, but rather in its formulation from a
collection of students’ stories. The same is true of the secondary themes. See chapter 5 for a
discussion of how the illumination, in this study, of themes that are already widely acknowledged
or supported in research and scholarship does not diminish the value of the study as a whole.
represents not individual elements, but multiple elements combined in a category / code or secondary theme. Parallel pathways that are not depicted connect relevant data excerpts to additional codes under “Diversity” as well as to the other secondary themes. Together, the multiple pathways lead to the primary theme. Beginning at the bottom level with the raw data, the table depicts two sample data extracts (abridged for space) from different students’ stories. These extracts are among those that are condensed into “only-ness,” which is the featured code that relates to the secondary theme involving diversity. Note that while the secondary themes are condensed for the sake of formatting on the map, here they are included in their entirety. The table depicts the breadth of data that supports the theme as well as the verifiability that is built into this approach to thematic analysis. Each secondary theme is presented more fully in the sections below.

**Table 4.1 - From Data to Theme - Spotlight on a Pathway**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Theme</th>
<th>Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Culture is complex and dynamic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Diversity - Diversity can isolate or connect depending on aspect and perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Family - Familial influences are consistently powerful but widely variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agency - Repositioning within cultural identities or relations reflects personal agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic Category / Code</td>
<td>Only-ness (the isolation of being alone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example Data Extract 1</td>
<td><em>(From Lofton’s story about his private school experience)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I went to _ (private school), which consisted of 25-30 classmates and me being 1 of the 1 and 1/2 African American people (laughter). Yeah, we had a light-skinned girl, and it was me. So I was 1 out of 1 and a half African Americans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example Data Extract 2</td>
<td><em>(from Marcus’s story about his public high school)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As I walked into my 5th period World Civilization class, I was, like how I was my whole entire life, the only black kid in the class.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Essential Stories

While the overview of data types in chapter 3 and the thematic map (Fig. 4.1) depict the scope of the analysis, the context of the themes within particular stories is essential as answering the research question in an authentic or useful way must include insight into the connections from data to theme. In math teacher terms, the stories show the work of the course. While codes and thematic categories are developed from references to culture in data extracts from the stories, stories are more than their parts. Just as a checklist will not capture a clear picture of cultural diversity, the power of a story can be lost without its context. Thus, in addition to including surrounding context in the data extracts and providing thick descriptions where possible as Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, providing an overview of the highlighted stories and the classroom situation in which they emerged provides context that supports the confirmability of the study by illustrating that the themes reflect and serve to illuminate the stories from which they were derived. So, while all of the stories in the data set contributed to one or more of the pathways that support the theme, several stories are featured prominently in this write-up, primarily because they clearly and succinctly illustrate both the patterns that define the themes and how they emerged from the course. Also important, however, are the ways these stories reflected topics of broader cultural significance, establishing the connections to the themes’ relevant fields.13

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13 See chapter 5 for a more thorough discussion of the implications of the Covid pivot at midterm to understanding the connections of students' stories to bodies of scholarship of sociocultural interest. Note, however, that the selection of the featured stories does not imply that the stories that are not featured heavily were not relevant to current topics; rather the featured stories tend to include those that were developed enough, even in the curtailed course schedule, to make those connections most clear.
While Leslie, Lofton, and Jasmine’s stories are essential to the clarity and development of the themes, their stories are developed above in the safety section to offer insight into the ways the course experience became a safe space in which rich stories were both welcome and nurtured (or coaxed). In addition to those, Tyler and Kristine’s stories include powerful examples of some of the relevant patterns and topics, making them essential to the exploration and analysis as well. So, an overview of each of these additional essential stories is presented in Table 4.2. The overviews are essentially summaries; they are not meant to diminish the power of the stories as they emerged in the course or to highlight everything of interest or significance they contained. To do so would be beyond the scope of this analysis. Rather, these summaries are intended to contextualize the particular aspects of the stories that are referenced in the discussions that follow of how patterns and connections across stories contributed to the development of the categories and themes of the course, and to illuminate, where relevant, the context and conditions of the class experience that supported the stories.

**Table 4.2 - Overview of More Essential Stories**

| Tyler Sets Priorities | Tyler was a quiet white man with a friendly smile and a baseball cap generally somewhere on his desk, presumably having been removed from his head upon entering the building or classroom. His story was about choosing a new high school when the golf coach, who was also his father, retired from his school, and Tyler had to transfer in order to continue playing for a team.

He described his community and the three high schools - the one he was leaving and his two other options. The schools were fairly similar, all being predominantly white and rural, but while all were small by the standards of many schools in more populous areas, their sizes were drastically different to Tyler, whose home school was the smallest.

Tyler developed the other differences that he used as criteria to choose between them in terms of morals, values, and interactional styles of the students. These criteria carried over to his choice of college and illuminated |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------|

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how his shift from a small, white, rural high school to an HBCU was not as drastic as it might appear. Through workshopping and development, Tyler’s story revealed that while he was now in a much more visibly diverse place, it “felt more like home” to him than the predominantly white institutions he visited. His story provides an interesting perspective of the different ways safety and belonging may be understood in experiences of diversity. His story connects with a solid body of scholarship that examines the experiences of white students at HBCUs\(^\text{14}\).

**Kristine - The House that Built Me.**

Kristine was a small white woman with blonde hair and blue eyes. She smiled freely and took notes on everything, including the syllabus discussion. She referenced her working class background and rural roots frequently. She called her story “The House that Built Me,” and she focused on the many times she and her mother had moved while she was growing up and all of the houses they had lived in. Her story is interesting in both content and tone, particularly as she develops it over the course of two presentation/workshopping sessions.

The story highlights the impact of Kristine’s culturally-driven desire for a “childhood home” to return to as an adult as well as her attempts to shift her perspective on more dominant narratives of family and home and to take comfort in her connections to the homes of her extended family. Her story connects with other data around the topics of family, values, and adaptability, one of the codes that feeds into the category of diversity. Her story provides a foothold into the cultural significance of the American Dream narrative by way of class, home ownership, and family structure.\(^\text{15}\)

**Patterning the Matterings - Categorizing Cultural Talk in Students’ Stories**

As discussed above, a primary theme found in students’ stories is that in terms of lived experience, culture is complex and dynamic. Again, while not new or particularly controversial, this theme is applicable in useful ways to a broad range of discussions of teaching and learning. By the same token, retracing the steps of thematic development to

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\(^{14}\) As mentioned in Chapter 1, racial diversity in HBCU enrollments has risen since Brown, and increased notably in the 1980’s. Research on white students at HBCUs spans the decades and remains of contemporary interest. Examples of scholarship spanning several decades include Conrad et al. (1997); Closson & Henry (2008); Carter & Fountaine (2012); Shorette & Arroyo (2015); and Goss (2021).

\(^{15}\) Research on the American Dream and its class, race, and gender implications are far too numerous to list. Goodman & Mayer (2018) provide just one example connecting the expectation of home ownership to this cultural framework.
explore the more concrete and specific cultural experiences and perceptions that illuminate the theme can be useful to understanding its implications and potential. For instance, the complexity and dynamism of culture is supported by the secondary themes identified through explorations of families, diversity, and agency as a form of cultural repositioning in students’ stories.

While the importance of data points in the current study was a matter of frequency in some cases and a matter of connections or patterns within the data set in others, their significance to the lived experience of culture, their mattering, lives in the stories. Examining the way matterings emerge from stories of different experiences and from different cultural experiences illuminates the connections between these instances and enhances the relevance of the themes they support. Likewise, an understanding of how the analysis developed these instances into themes that represent both the connection and the individual stories is also helpful in addressing the research question by illuminating the potential of this particular narrative approach to teaching and learning about culture and fostering cultural responsiveness. As the secondary themes represent the analytical step between first recognizing and categorizing interesting elements in the data (in the codes and categories of raw data) and finally defining the big picture about culture that the stories together reveal (in the primary theme), they reflect how stories can both simplify and complicate understandings of cultural experiences.

**Family - Familial Influences are Consistently Powerful but Widely Variable**

Of all of the categories of codes developed to organize this data set, the thickest by far was family. Students’ stories featured mothers most frequently, fathers nearly as often, and extended adult relatives and siblings less frequently but in equal proportion to
one another. Instances of family in the data were further sorted into categories involving parental control and family pride or legacy. Each of these categories highlights different ways families can matter to individuals’ perspectives and experiences and the different ways cultural influences may contribute to those perspectives. Overall, the course stories suggest that in terms of the dynamism and complexity of culture, families play a consistently powerful but widely variable influence on individuals’ lives and perspectives.

**Family-- Parental Control**

Not surprisingly the stories of this group of 19 and 20 year olds featured frequent instances of parental control and/or the shifting of power from parent to child. Multiple relevant extracts from four different stories were coded under the topic. The stories revealed that while parental control is an important aspect of what ways storytellers thought and talked about family, the forms and implications of parental control on parent-child relationships varied dramatically across and sometimes even within stories. Parental control is variously presented as relational, with the parent-child relationship as the primary concern, or rational, that is founded on the consideration of a range of factors and family needs. In one instance in Leslie’s story of her childhood homes, she even presents her mother’s decision to continue renting instead of buying a house as almost arbitrary. As this was not consistent with other instances of her treatment of her mother, the relational/rational dichotomy provides a more accurate picture of what the course suggested about parental control.

Jasmine’s story of her decision to honor her father’s legacy contributes to the story the course data tells about family on several levels. Growing up, she was a multi-
sport athlete, and she now plays volleyball at the university. She opens her story with a
description of her father’s role in her life:

My dad, he was very influential in my life. He coached me in basketball since I
was 7. Um, once he found out that I wanted to play volleyball and soccer, he
learned those sports just so he could coach me, and he continued to be my coach
until I was in high school.

This extract demonstrates Jasmine’s story’s connection to the topics of parental control.
She establishes the significance of the connection with her father as a coach and presents
his decision to learn new sports as a way to allow her to choose new sports without
endangering that connection. Her father not only teaches her about the sports he knows
and loves when she is young, but he works to learn additional sports as she grows so that
he can continue supporting her in her own choices. Jasmine’s discussion of her father
intentionally and explicitly relinquishing control but maintaining his involvement with
her sports participation contrasts with Lofton’s treatment of the rational practicality that
guided decisions his mother made for him.

As noted above, before developing a sense of safety in the class community,
Lofton presented attending the private school as natural or spontaneous. The parental
decision to send him to the school did not become part of the story until later. When he
became comfortable being open in the class community, he acknowledged and critiqued
his mother’s decision: “I somewhat understood my mother just wanted the best for me,
but I absolutely hated the school. No one wants to be somewhere almost every day when
they are not comfortable.” His mother’s decision to have Lofton spend the night with his
private school classmate is transparent from his first presentation: “I would spend the
night just because I didn't have a ride to the game. My mom's at work on Saturday.” In this case, his mother’s reasoning does not rely on private information, like that concern about his absent father that he ultimately identified as her reason for keeping him in sports. Nor is it related to a conflict of values between Lofton and his mother, like her view that private school was the best for him conflicted with his view that his high school was far better for him. With implications more threatening to his sense of privacy and loyalty to his mother, these decisions were left unexplored until he was safe. Spending the night with a friend “just because” he did not have a ride to the game was not threatening to his sense of self or his perception of his mother. She was at work, confirming her presentation as a successful business owner and “hard-working queen.” As such, Lofton presents it as natural that she would make decisions about him based on the logical necessities of her schedule.

Leslie’s treatment of her mother’s role in her hair journey connects with Lofton’s treatment of his mother’s sleepover decision - she presents the decisions as the logical result of practical necessities that reside outside their impact on her. Elaborating on why her hair had been chemically straightened when she was young, Leslie explains, “yeah, my mom just. She just like, make it easier on her cause she had like 3 girls.” In this way, it becomes clear that Leslie’s mother was responsible for the hair of three daughters at one time; she'd given them all relaxers to make it easier to keep up. And this detail represented an addition to the story based on workshopping feedback. In Leslie’s original presentation, which was basically a very brief overview of her idea, she states that when she was younger, “I had like long kinda straight hair,” presenting her hair before she began caring for it herself as simply the way it was. She neither examined or even
acknowledged her mother’s decision to straighten her hair. Rather, she stated simply that her hair had been straight.

The insight that the connection between Lofton and Leslie’s treatment of these practical or parent-centered decisions is strengthened by the absence in their stories of any description of how and why their mothers relinquished control or responsibility for decisions that would affect them. Lofton mentions his decision to attend the high school he chose as the best decision he had ever made. Likewise, Leslie noted: “my hair started breaking off cause I started doing my own hair.” Whereas Jasmine’s story had addressed her father’s intentionality in giving Jasmine control over her choice of activities and his plan to maintain their connection and support her through the transition, Lofton and Leslie’s stories present the shift in power as more spontaneous or natural. Their mothers’ choices were practical in light of their responsibilities to and beyond their children. Then, offstage, the right to choose had changed hands, and with it the decisions and their consequences.

Kristine’s exploration of her mother’s control in her story about their many homes also represents a departure from Jasmine’s father’s emotion-driven, supportive approach to relinquishing control of Jasmine’s decisions. Kristine’s perspective of her mother’s decisions sometimes mirrors Leslie and Lofton’s sense of practical inevitability in that she does not describe having been involved in the decisions to move. Further, she describes one move as beyond anyone’s control because a neighbor had figured out how to get into their apartment through the attic. Ultimately, however, her relationship with her mother’s decision-making reflects more tension than either the supportive or practical approaches developed here. The tension between how Kristine sees her mother, including
her decisions about housing, and the dominant narratives that inform her understanding of home and family are more fully developed in the section below on agency as repositioning within contact zones.

*Family-- Legacy & Pride*

Participants from across cultural groups commonly connected with their communities through family legacies. Most frequently, these connections reflected pride. Jasmine, for instance, was extremely proud of her father’s legacy of community involvement. She also noted the generational legacy of athletic achievement at the school that she attended. The legacy did not define her, as she chose the sports she wanted to play based on interest, but it did serve to guide and support her decision about how to honor her father. Tyler’s story was made up almost entirely of descriptions of his community and comparisons between the high school he attended there and the two he considered as transfer options in nearby communities. Still, despite his focus on school, he mentioned his family throughout the story. His father was necessarily included because his retirement was the reason Tyler had to switch schools. But rather than examining or critiquing his father’s decision, which Tyler shrugs off even when asked directly why his father wouldn’t just wait to retire, the presence of family serves another function in Tyler’s story. While he explains that he switched schools because, “we didn’t have a coach anymore,” his father’s presence in the story seems more about how he understood his own place in the community through his family. In describing his community and his place in it, he also mentioned that his mother had been an educator and that, like him, his older brother had also been a multi-sport varsity athlete. His pride in his family’s accomplishments and community presence was simply one of the ways
that he oriented himself within that community. His school choice ultimately involved an examination of what was important to him, or his cultural matterings, so his family’s involvement and community standing were a more natural part of the context of that story than his father’s retirement.

Interestingly, even in the absence of family relationships, some storytellers relied on family connections to orient themselves in community. Lofton, for instance, conveys pride in his high school by sharing names of famous Black athletes who attended, but he also explains that his grandmother, mother, and father all attended the school. Some of his teachers had been his parents’ classmates, “so they know me. So it's kinda like I felt, everyone knows me, my family, so I can, I don't know.” Considering that Lofton referred to his father as “my sperm donor” in the second version of his story, it is interesting that he still associates his father with the family legacy connection at the school. This suggests that in some cases, the familial pride that comes through in so many stories relates to a sense of belonging in a community. Unlike his private school experience where he would have had to assimilate to belong, Lofton was neither expected nor able to pretend to be someone else at this high school where his people had belonged for generations.

Kristine’s story, like Lofton’s, conveyed the importance of family pride in identification and belonging. The many houses that Kristine and her mother have shared are in city neighborhoods. However, she establishes the significance of her extended family on her self perception by including the more rural homes of her grandparents and aunt in her story. Kristine asserts, “I have always lived in the city, but I’m a country girl at heart.” Her grandfather and his second wife live on what Kristine refers to as simply
“the farm.” The farm has been her source of stability through the years and the many moves. She always spent summers there and explains that the farm was where she got to fish, hunt, and ride four-wheelers. She further notes that she and her grandfather have a wonderful relationship and that he has been her primary male role-model. This pride in and connection with her rural, blue-collar family roots lays the foundation for conflict with some of the more dominant, middle-class values that she also conveys. This conflict is developed below in the discussion of agency and repositioning within the contact zone.

**Diversity - Diversity Can Isolate or Connect Depending on Aspect and Perspective**

Students’ stories revealed complexity in the way diversity is experienced and understood. Unlike the whiteboard checklists discussed in Chapter 1 that played such a frustrating role in the conception and development of this course, the explorations of diversity in students’ stories did not engage in the futile effort to identify and incorporate representations of all of the social and cultural characteristics that could be viewed as measures of diversity. Rather, students' stories addressed the types or characteristics of diversity that had come to matter in their experiences and interpretations, such as independence, community mindedness, and even aesthetic sensibility.

One theme that emerges from the experiences of diversity students included in their stories was that diversity can isolate by creating a sense of “only-ness”, or it can foster connections in new communities. A contributing factor to which way an experience will go is the importance or value that the individual places on the characteristic or aspect of identity that is perceived as “diverse” in a given situation. In Spindler’s (2000) language, this perception of importance can be understood as the tension between a situated identity that a person develops to navigate a certain situation,
and the person’s heritage identity. Prolonged exposure to a community or culture in which an individual sees no point of connection with others in terms of cultural or social aspects that are perceived as essential or foundational to one’s heritage identity, can result in a sense of isolation termed “only-ness” after the repeated use of phrases involving being “the only” of something in incidents across stories. Diversity involving non-essential identity or cultural characteristics, on the other hand, had the potential to forge connections in new communities.

**Only-ness**

Although the story has been developed and examined as a part of multiple themes from the course, Lofton’s experiences in elementary, middle, and high school offer compelling insight on both only-ness and the identification and implications of essential cultural characteristics. As noted above, Lofton used the phrases “inner city kid” and “single parent home” in several places and on multiple occasions as his story unfolded. And while, as noted above, his use of these phrases represents Platt’s (1990) concept of ethnographic texts, that does not suggest that these identity aspects are essential to Lofton’s identity. Indeed, as a practice best suited to the contact zone, using ethnographic texts or cultural descriptors that have already been established by the dominant culture to communicate with members of that culture is likely a technique meant to connect on more neutral, less individually valuable ground.

Instead, the characteristics that seemed to drive Lofton’s descriptions of himself and his perceptions include his fun-loving, playful attitude, his energy, his independence,
and his adaptability. And these are exactly the characteristics that he identifies as the reasons for his conflict in the private school. For instance, Lofton explained that “they LOVED me, like, but they knew, like, I was.. he's just gonna do what he want.” This demonstrates that he is aware that his independence is incompatible with the culture of the school. He makes similar points about his humor, energy, interactional style, and more. Thus, as these are the characteristics he notes as still important to him at the time of the course, their incompatibility with the school culture was isolating. Adapting, as he was generally so willing to do, at this school would have meant sacrificing what he saw as his essential characteristics.

**New Community**

Tyler’s story depicts the other side of the experiencing diversity coin. As an older student with some autonomy in his choice of schools, Tyler was able to decide which school, of the two that were near enough, that he wanted to attend. While both schools looked similar to one another and to his previous school in all but size from an outsider’s perspective, Tyler explained the differences in terms of the proportion of people he knew that were devout in their religious beliefs and would not take advantage of the opportunities to use drugs and alcohol which were much more widely available at both of the new options. He chose the option that best suited the parts of himself that he most valued, and the strategy paid off: “The choices I made in choosing a new school allowed me to have a positive high school experience. At my new school, I was given the

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16 While Lofton labels them differently, the characteristics with which he identifies throughout his story relate directly to five of the nine manifestations of cultural style that Boykin (1994) identifies as common among African Americans. See Boykin and Noguera (2011) for further development of the work. These connections are further interesting in light of Lofton’s middle school experience, though less well developed in his story.
opportunity to meet new people, to grow and build new relationships, to embrace new ideas, and have multiple experiences.”

**Agency - Repositioning within Cultural Identities or Relations Reflects Personal Agency**

As students brought many stories of experiences with diversity, their stories generally included explorations of their various social or cultural group memberships or identities. Because the course was made up of a diverse group of students, their stories also represented different relationships with the dominant cultural narratives at play in the contexts of their stories. All of these cultural narratives and identities coexisted in the stories providing opportunities to examine what happens at the intersections of cultural and social identities. However, this does not suggest that students shared stories of being knocked helplessly about by variable cultural winds. Students’ stories frequently feature agency, enacted in efforts to seek or maintain a sense of belonging within or among different cultural groups or identities. In other words, stories featured demonstrated how storytellers defined and clarified their individual identities within and/or among different cultural identities to which they had access. Their stories reveal different attempts at or approaches to this process, which I refer to as agentic repositioning, within cultural identities or relations to alleviate the tensions or reconcile the contradictions that arise at cultural intersections.

**Repositioning within Contact Zones**

Students’ stories highlighted interactions between people or perspectives from different cultures, sometimes bringing dominant and non-dominant cultures into contact.
In such cases, some stories reflected a “phenomenon of the contact zone” called acculturation. Pratt (1991) explains:

Ethnographers have used the term transculturation to describe processes by which members of subordinated or marginalized groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture. While subordinate peoples do not usually control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for. (p. 36)

Acculturation allows storytellers to challenge cultural valuations through intentional juxtaposition and repositioning.

Kristine’s story serves as an interesting look at the practice of acculturation. While Kristine looked as though she might identify with dominant middle class American culture, she was careful to point out that she did not. She explained in early class discussions that she was from a working class home and was bothered by people continually assuming that she was an over-privileged princess. Her story confirms her working class roots. It takes the form of an annotated catalog of the many places she and her mother have lived. She includes Google Earth images of each house and laughs as she discusses 3 different houses that neither she nor her mother could remember. Her presentation is by far the longest and most object-oriented of the first drafts. sharing memories or vignettes related to the houses that she can remember. Like the catalog of ships in the Iliad, Kristine’s list of houses makes a point with its sheer length. She has lived in far more places than she considers normal, and her story supports the lament in her introductory statement: “We’ve lived in so many houses, that I don’t really have a
home to go back to like most college students, like a family home.” Her statement
conveys her relationship with the dominant culture - she accepts the value of its norms
and expectations but fails to meet its goals.

She establishes other cultural identities or tropes by way of rationale as she
presents the houses. Her memories of two of the houses, for instance, reveal that her
mother raised her alone. With the first house, she explains, “This was the house where
___, that’s what I call my dad, lived with us, but I was too young to remember that.” She
identifies the house after the next as “the last house where ___ [her dad] visited us.”
Unlike Lofton whose use of the phrase “single-parent home” introduced a dominant
narrative into his story, Kristine lets the recognizable narrative of a broken home emerge
indirectly. Likewise, she includes a photograph of a hospital where her mother worked in
this catalog of homes because “she worked so much that it became like a second home to
me,” establishing her mother as both hard working and independent.

However, the tension between these and the more idealized cultural norms against
which she has organized her story is evident in statements like, “We always rented
because she refused to buy a house.” Having established familial context by revealing
that her single mother worked long hours but was still unable to pay a babysitter,
Kristine’s assertion that her mother “refused” to buy a home is inconsistent. Yet a
statement that acknowledged an outright inability to buy a home despite 18 years or more
of consistent hard work would have conflicted with the dominant cultural belief in an
American Dream of bootstraps and progress. Again, Kristine does not incorporate
cultural beliefs into her story directly; rather, she alludes to the American Dream
narrative when she juxtaposes a much shorter catalog of all the houses where her aunt has
lived. This catalog includes only 3 homes, and each is noticeably larger and of higher quality than the one before. Her aunt’s second home is the one where she lived when she met and married her husband and began building her family (with a dog and a baby). With the third house, labeled on the slide as “The Farm,” Kristine explains, “They built this one themselves.” Figure 4.2 includes the three images, in chronological order from top to bottom, from the slide Kristine titled “Cool Aunt,” on which she presents her aunt’s parade of homes as an alternative to her own.
As Kristine presents her aunt’s final house, Lofton interjects with an appreciative:

“Oh, she built that?” And upon Kristine’s confirmation he asserts, “She did it right!”

Kristine is momentarily thrown by the interruption, but once she understands what Lofton is saying she responds, “Right? Exactly! She got married, built a house, and then had kids.” This exchange confirms the conflict between her pride in her hard working mother and her desire for a traditional family home and the family that goes with it.
This tension remains a part of Kristine’s story throughout, but during the workshopping session of her first presentation and the presentation and workshopping session of the second, Kristine began to consider and present additions and developments that more fully illuminated her working-class, blue collar cultural identification. For instance, she shared a snapshot of her paternal grandparents and her brother with his partner and child. She explains that she and the brother are very close in age, and that he was very young when his partner had a baby, just as their parents had been very young when she and her brother were born. She notes that while she hasn’t really ever gotten to know her dad’s family, there was time to make memories now. Her decision at this point to call him “my dad” instead of his first name suggests that she is working to reposition herself as she develops her story.

Toward the end of the second presentation, Kristine introduces additional images and content that represent another repositioning of her perspective within these conflicting cultural influences. The image represents the home of her grandmother, the farmer grandfather’s first wife. “Here’s her house. I don’t have any pictures of the inside because she’s a hoarder.” During workshopping, Kristin explains that this grandmother had fled from the violence of two husbands, Kristine’s grandfather and a second husband who ended up being even worse. She considers this as a possible reason her grandmother hoards now: “She basically had to leave everything behind” both times she left her husbands. Taken together, these developments and additions demonstrate Kristine’s effort, in telling her story, to consider more deeply the perspectives of her mother and other family members. The shift in perspective was gradual and subtle, but it did reflect her effort to reconsider the conflicting cultural expectations with which she identifies and
to reconcile the contradictions by repositioning herself and her family members in relation to those perspectives.

**Repositioning at Intersections**

The story of Leslie’s transition to natural hair is central to understanding both the cultural themes and the role safety played in supporting the development of those themes. The workshopping experience that elicited much of her story is featured in the exploration of safety above. Likewise, her perspective on parental control and decision-making is integral to that secondary theme. The inclusion of her story here highlights its significance to the theme of agentic repositioning. Leslie’s hair journey reveals the conflict between two cultural aesthetics, both of which were part of her cultural identity and community frame of reference, despite their inherent contradictions. Her story reflects her agentic repositioning in relation to those cultural perspectives of beauty.

Like much of the content of her story, Leslie’s depiction of agentic repositioning was developed in large part during the collaborative workshopping sessions following her first presentation. After Kristine’s initial questions about Black hair care in general that comprise the safe house discussion above, her classmates’ questions led Leslie to elaborate on how she made the decision to embrace so drastic a change.

Leslie brings up a group she identifies with— the Black women in her family. “Um, I guess everybody in my family, like my cousins and auntie and stuff, they was going natural too. So I was like the only one that wasn't natural, so I just cut it off.” This connection to her family and the Black women she admires demonstrates how Leslie’s position in her family community influenced her decision to consider change.
had always been straight, but she sees people with whom she identifies embracing their curls. But simply following a family trend would not offer much insight on agency.

As she continues elaborating on the experience, she describes the new natural look through an allusion to a particular Black aesthetic. Asked how short she cut her hair, Leslie responds, “Umm. Jackson 5 short.” Several students laugh in approval of this comparison, and as entertaining as pop culture references may be, allusions are a literary device because of their power to convey meaning. Leslie’s choice of reference is not neutral. Her current hairstyle is very much like the one she showed in her last picture, and both are arguably “Jackson 5 short.” But she did not say, “About this length,” or even, “The same length as in this picture here.” The reference evokes a meaning beyond the physical description. Leslie’s description calls upon a classic Black cultural reference to a time and place in which natural hair was celebrated and presented as an alternative to the dominant white beauty aesthetic. In this way, Leslie conveys not only the length of her hair, but also an indication of the criteria she used or the pride she took in making the decision.

Kristine, as a cultural outsider in terms of Leslie’s story, needs additional context to connect Leslie’s story to her current frame of reference. When Leslie asks for additional ideas, Kristine asks, “How does your hair affect you? Like cause I know that's something that I've heard a lot of African American women say is that their hair is like a big thing so like how has it affected you, I guess?” The question speaks to her growing understanding and continued interest. She is noticing how Leslie’s story makes the general specific, giving definition to an abstract idea. Kristine had heard that Black women’s hair was important and culturally significant in ways that she did not
understand. The details Leslie has shared are relevant, but Kristine wants to understand Leslie’s emotional connection to the change, in addition to her family and cultural influences. Leslie’s answer becomes the heart of her story of agentic repositioning:

Umm. I will say I kinda like… I became myself… yeah. Cause the whole thing was like, even one of my EX best friends, she was like, you gonna look ugly with that. And now she ask me how do I maintain my hair, so, yeah.

Leslie’s story of transition is about much more than a haircut. Her story is about enacting agency by embracing change in the face of conflicting cultural norms. She had straight hair when she was young, and she did not explicitly reject straightened styles on principle. Still, although the women in her family had all gone natural, her former friend’s appearance in the story better illuminates the significance of the phrase “going natural.” Leslie’s experience is reflective of an important element of this larger topic—no one says “staying natural” because the cultural pressure to adopt the dominant white aesthetic is so ubiquitous and long-standing that it is the assumed default. “Going natural,” implies change from an unnatural state. The assumption is that a repositioning within conflicting cultural identities will be required. Still, in this story, Leslie does not directly address the eurocentric beauty standards that complicate Black women’s experiences with and choices about their hair. Rather, her unquestioning acceptance of her straight hair early on and the reaction of her ex friend represent the conflicting cultural expectations that drive her story. Whether she articulated it or not, Leslie’s story demonstrates that she understood the beauty standards that valued straight hair, and they were not external to the cultural identifications of her family and social groups. Some family members, however, had presented a different orientation and embraced an
alternate aesthetic. So even though she notes a trend in her family and the damage her hair had sustained from her styling choices as contributing factors, her choice reflects an agentic repositioning toward an alternative cultural aesthetic.

**Conclusions - What’s in a Theme?**

As the themes identified in this analysis reflect, students’ stories were full of culture as lived experience. The development and sharing of the stories allowed students to frame their experiences in ways that reflected cultural insights as well as a variety of ways individuals navigate within and among cultural influences. In revealing how small, personal stories from the lives of students who, though thoughtful and engaged, were new to the field of education and had done little to no reading or research on culture or culturally responsive teaching, could address topics and reveal themes that are consistent with years of research and scholarship confirms the potential of narrative ways of knowing and learning about culture.

Likewise, students’ midterm and final reflections on what they had learned revealed that not only had they encountered topics of cultural significance as common themes in their stories, but that crafting, sharing, revising, and retelling stories together in this way had given them fresh insight on both new and familiar cultural perspectives. This insight from Kristine’s final reflection, for instance, helped assure me that I was not imagining the power of the exchange about Leslie’s story that is highlighted above:

Leslie’s cultural asset is her hair. I did not know much about hair types different from mine, and she helped me learn. As a teacher, I will be sure to respect everyone’s hair type, and be sure to be conscious of the fact that some girls, and boys too, may be insecure about it. There is no right or wrong way to wear your
hair. I’ve seen instances where African American students are required to cut their hair or are made to wear it in a different way because people simply don’t like it. I will be sure to stand up for these children, in hopes of educating other teachers about it.

From her questions during the workshopping of Leslie’s story, it was clear that Kristine had known that Black women’s hair was culturally significant in some way, but Leslie’s story had particularized that general truth, giving her an understanding that opened her eyes to related stories she had heard but not fully understood.

Students likewise confirmed that the stories and storytelling had influenced their understandings of their own cultural perspectives. Leslie and Jasmine mentioned how much teaching and learning in collaboration with their peers had been important to their growth in the class. Jasmine noted in her final reflection, “This class taught me much more about myself than any other class I have taken.” Tyler, who mentioned that the emotion that came through had helped him connect with his classmates' stories, likewise mentioned learning about himself. As a white man, he had expected the course to involve him learning about other cultures only. He explains in his final reflection for the course:

I find that I am amazed at how little I had ever really thought about my own cultural assets, my values and the importance of cultural responsiveness. Coming from a small rural _____ community, I thought my cultural assets and strengths seemed “limited” in comparison to others.

His recognition of his own cultural perspectives and strengths presents Lee’s (2007) critique that only people of color are treated as having culture in a new light. Not only is
that form of othering damaging to the students of color who are perceived as the only ones “needing” culturally responsive teaching, but it is also damaging to the students from dominant cultures who are left without the tools to examine and analyze the implications of their cultural identities. And while this recognition is not, on its own, sufficient to convey the privilege that comes with membership in a “default” social or cultural group, it is arguably a necessary step.

Stories make space for the things that we know and understand about our cultures as well as the things that we don't; the things we love and the things we don't. Further, stories make space for all of those things at the same time, presenting the complexity of cultural understandings and identities in ways that a checklist simply could not. The argumentative writing that is so frequently favored in educational settings focuses on choosing sides and proving points. Stories allow both tellers and listeners to sit with complexity and conflict. That has been the power of this course and this way of understanding it.
CHAPTER V: SHOW ME A DAY WHEN THE WORLD WASN’T NEW17

In each chapter of this write-up, I have shared stories from my life, primarily about lessons I have learned as a student and a mother that have brought me to where I am as an educator and researcher. I have done this in an effort to be reflexive and clear about how I made sense of the course experience and study of it, but also because this reflects the way I approach understanding in general. I call upon my narrative capital, incorporating new experiences and ideas into my repertoire without even knowing what effect they will have on everything that’s already there. The writing of this dissertation is by no means the first occasion that has called the stories I’ve shared to mind in the years since the events took place; in fact, I’ve thought of most of them often, and used more than one in previous teaching or writing experiences. However, as familiar as the stories felt when I first called upon them for this purpose, writing them here has changed them yet again, just as every retelling does, and as much as they have informed my thinking here, they likewise have been informed by it. Moving forward, the same will be true, I do not doubt, of the story of this course. I have told it and retold it, considered it and reconsidered it, shared it and tucked it away by turns. And now it is part of my repertoire. I feel confident that many of the students who lived the experience with me also own a version of the story. And I know that this story will continue to change and be changed as it travels from hand to hand, and story to story. This chapter captures my version in its

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17 Quote attributed to Sister Barbara Hance
most current form, as an exploration of perspectives and patterns that revealed several foundational themes—that culture is complex and dynamic; that family is always important, but not always in similar or predictable ways; that diversity can either isolate or connect, depending on one’s perspective of the difference; and that agency can take the form of repositioning oneself within cultural identities or relations.

The Story of a Course

I have been teaching classes on The Hill for over 15 years. In that time, I’ve had classes that went beautifully, and others that flopped, but I had never worked as hard at planning a course as I did at planning this one. And yet this was the only class I’d ever walked into with absolutely no idea what we were going to discuss. That is not to say that I had always been correct about what we would discuss, but intentionally not knowing was a new experience. But that was the price of centering students’ stories. It meant sharing responsibility for more than half of the content we would explore and any sense of predictive confidence in what we might discuss. My biggest fear was that we’d end up with nothing to discuss at all. The fear was not unfounded. I knew I would have to get students engaged early if I hoped to get them at all. That was one thing I’d learned about teaching on The Hill - we did not have a culture of attendance or engagement. The first week of class was kind of like a campaign, and you could never be sure where you stood in the polls. Because students might smile at you and do the ice-breakers you had planned, but ultimately, they would vote with their feet. I have taught classes that started with twenty-five students in the first week, and ended with fewer than ten. I knew that once the exodus started, it could end with me all alone, wondering where I’d gone wrong.
So when a young man in the back of our tiny classroom decided to slip out, which was impossible considering I’d moved the little roly teacher’s desk out of the way of the projector screen, and since there was really nowhere for it to go, it was now blocking the door, I panicked a bit inside. There were only 14 students on the roster, and one of them had not shown up. This young man clearly wasn’t going to the restroom because he’d quietly packed up all of his things as I’d been talking. And with nowhere else to look, everyone was watching. We were barely 15 minutes in, and I’d been describing what the course would entail. I’m not sure if his trigger was “collaboration,” “storytelling,” or “presentation,” but something I’d said was clearly not his cup of tea. He wanted out so badly that he couldn’t wait until the end of class and just never come back, as protocol dictated. He was going to squeeze past me, move my desk to open the door, and leave before the halfway point of the very first class meeting of a course I’d been planning for two years. And no one was going to miss it. But I would have to move for his plan to work.

I decided to play dumb. I smiled as he approached and looked at him like I didn’t realize he wanted past. Like he was coming to talk to me, even though I was standing in front of the class talking to everyone. “Yes, sir, what can I do for you?” He hadn’t even wanted to look at me, so this threw him. If I could just pretend not to understand, maybe he’d feel so awkward he’d give up.

“Oh, um, no thank you, I,” he nodded his head toward the door, trying to help me understand, seemed a little embarrassed for me. I looked at the door, confused. Was there someone there? Hmm. No, just a door. I didn’t understand. We were talking with our eyes. He wasn’t going to be put off. “Oh, excuse me,” he said aloud, pointing toward the
door now, “I need…” It was too clear. If I kept it up, I’d be a jerk or a dunce to everyone left in the room. They’d either mistrust or dislike me, and either would be a bad start. I let understanding dawn on my face.

I’d have to try being direct. “Oh, is everything okay? We have another hour of class, and it’s really important that you don’t miss anything.” At least they’d heard that. I hadn’t just rolled over, and I hadn’t been a jerk. He sort of mumbled an apology and waited, looking at the door. I shifted the furniture and let him go. And as we both knew in that moment that he would not, he never came back.

Luckily, he was no Pied Piper. His defection had not started a trend. My firm attempt to cut him off may have even worked in my favor. I can’t be sure. But whatever the reason, these students kept voting to come back. They brought their stories and their insights, some questions and some answers. As noted in Chapter 1, the class composition was ideal, though small. I knew that if I could hand over the control in a way that made them want to take it, these students and their stories would craft an amazing curriculum. I had to be confident that what we were doing was important, and I could not doubt that they would bring the stories and lead the discussions. I had to show them that I knew that they could do this and that I was ready to learn from them.

And so I was confident; I did not doubt them; and I did not have to show them anything because they took to leading the class together like they were born to it. I wasn’t sure exactly what was happening, but I knew that it was good. I knew that we were learning together. As spring break approached and we scheduled our one-on-one conferences during the last class period before the break, I should have been worried. Students almost never showed up the last day before a break. You were lucky to see more
than half a class show up on a Thursday before Labor Day, truth be told, let alone Spring Break. But, this time, I was not afraid. I knew they would come. I knew they’d bring insights on what they had done together so far, and share things that I hadn’t even considered. And when nearly everyone showed up on time and ready to reflect, I was not surprised. I knew they would. But as much as I’d come to know them, I did not know they would not be back.

The COVID Pivot, or the Long, Slow Death of a Course

In a pre-COVID world, I suspect I would have gotten over the unexpected shift of an in-person class to an online format more quickly. Even if the shift had amounted to de facto cancellation for most of my students. Even if they were my favorite students and the class had been one that I thought would somehow change my life, or at least my career. I would have made exaggerated sad faces when I ran into those students on campus. I would have hugged them, and assured them that I was still SO bummed we didn’t get to finish our amazing class together. I would have talked to them about their new classes and known that they were going to be okay. And I would have brushed myself off and tried again, tried to do it even better next time. But this is not a pre-COVID world.

My students left the little adjunct office I had borrowed for our one-on-one midterm conferences on March 5, 2020, and I never saw them again. At least not in person. Half of them never even checked in over email or Blackboard in the online half of our course. They were gone, and our course was over. But we didn’t realize it, or at least I didn’t. Not right away. The following Friday should have been the last day of spring break. It was my oldest daughter’s 16th birthday. We’d do a big celebration later, when it was safe. We couldn’t have a real party with all of this going on, but we were
sure we’d celebrate properly soon. For now, a small family dinner would be fine. Just my husband and me, our birthday girl and her three siblings, my sister, my niece and nephew, my great niece, and my mom and dad. That’s all. Small. As I watched her blow out her candles, I had no idea this would be the last time we were in a room with anyone outside our family, “family” by the new COVID definition, that is, for the next year or more. That I wouldn’t see my parents’ faces without masks again for most of that year. That when we did finally negotiate our fear, mostly mine, and set up folding chairs in their backyard, six feet apart, and sit down safely and take off our masks, that we all would look so shell-shocked and old. I didn’t know my daughter would spend the whole of her 16th year, not learning to drive or going to dances, but shutting herself in her room and staring at the walls. And now, three years later, despite the return to relative normalcy, for good or bad I wouldn’t presume to say, I still shudder at the thought of having a party of more than twelve people, all in one place. Who had I imagined was going to come? It makes me uncomfortable to even imagine. Had we really lived that way?

But at that time, recall, none of us knew. And I was just annoyed. Here they’d jumped on the close it down bandwagon, all safety first and the like. The place that, in 2013, in an ice storm that had shut down every K12 school and campus for a hundred miles, couldn’t be bothered to either cancel classes or shovel the parking lot in which my husband had slipped on the ice and fallen so badly that he’d shattered his ankle and would set off metal detectors and walk with a limp for the rest of his life, that place suddenly found an abundance of caution? I was not pleased with The Hill at that time. Not that I’d wanted to go back around people, mind you. Lock down actually looked a whole lot like what I did naturally when I wasn’t actually required to be somewhere other
than home, or at least that’s what I’d thought at first. But not now. My class. My study. I was so annoyed. And what was this going to mean?

Was I going to have to try to get another section of this class again next semester? There was no way I’d get such a perfect group of students again. But would I have enough data? Some of the students were responding to my emails and posting things to Blackboard, but it wasn’t the same. And how could it be? I knew many of them didn’t have laptops, or even reliable internet. And everyone was worried. I had adjusted the assignments so much that they weren’t going to tell me what I’d wanted to know anyway. But maybe that could be interesting. Maybe I could talk about that. At home, we made it through a spring of NTI worksheets and isolation, sure that we wouldn’t miss the whole summer. It seems absurd to even put it on paper today. I don’t even honestly remember, but I was still keeping reflections, so I can see in my own handwriting that these are the things I was thinking. I honestly did not know.

Classes began again, but campus was still closed. Online only, like everything. I lit up to see Tyler, Leslie, and Kristine on the roster of another course I was teaching. I emailed them to check in. There may have been some enthusiasm in the exchanges, but the exaggerated sad faces and the hugs were a no go. We weren’t on the other side of anything yet. I talked to Leslie and Tyler, separately, one-on-one, in video calls that semester. They were the only two who had responded to my email request to catch up and talk about what they remembered, but it wasn’t the same. I had, at the suggestion of one of my dissertation committee members, read back through my notes and listened to some of our recordings before we talked so that I could spark their memories and maybe some insights.
They smiled politely from my laptop screen when I played snippets of audio. “Oh yeah. That was fun.” Leslie nodded a lot. Confirmed everything I threw out to reference something from the class and then let it fall. She smiled at me expectantly, not really sure what I wanted from her. Tyler repeated a couple of the things he’d said in the final reflection he’d sent me. He had clearly just reread it before our meeting. It was kind of him. But it wasn’t the same. The class was over, and it was hard to remember things now. I understood that. Tyler and I shifted gears, and I asked about how he had been. Was everyone in good health? Had he been doing okay with online classes? They were fine, he said. He’d just been home, and it wasn’t really hard to social distance so far out in the country. And their community had always been the kind to take care of each other. He was actually really worried, he said, about the others from our class. In the cities where people were “packed so tight.” And the girls, with all the stores shut down, were they able to get the things they needed for their hair? There was something here, of course. Tyler’s narrative repertoire had expanded to some extent. His own “ideological environment” to recall Bakhtin’s (1986) terminology, did not limit his thinking. He was engaged, at some level, in what Frank (2010) termed dialogical narrative analysis—bringing different stories into conversation to better think about what was going on. But as glad as I was that he remembered the class and his classmates fondly, I missed this meaning. I had not yet begun to separate what I’d wanted to happen from what we had actually done. We ended the call and I wanted to cry. I went back downstairs to force my second and third graders to do math worksheets online. I stopped taking field notes.
For the past three years, whenever any well-meaning colleague or family member would ask about my PhD program, I would explain that I was still working on my dissertation. Soon, I’d say. Just have to keep plugging away. I’ll get there. Good natured chuckle. Oh, yeah, The Little Engine that Could and all. Reader, excepting the last 6 months, for the past two years or so, since much of the US enjoyed their first Zoom Thanksgiving, whenever any well-meaning colleague or family member would ask about my PhD program, I would lie to them. I was not still working on it. I was not plugging away. Working again might have been honest. I was opening a blank page every few months, writing pages upon pages of all the connections and ideas that had been coming to me, looking back at what I’d written last time, scoffing at how stupid that sounded, filing that one away in the rejected file, and shaking my head. This new version is the one, I would think; I’ve got it now. I’ll plug away some more tomorrow, I would think, and I would close my computer.

Eventually I recognized that pattern, and after a few more cycles I started forcing myself to share my work and ideas with my faculty mentors. They offered insight and encouragement, but a question that kept coming up confused me. How was I going to get into the data? How was I going to analyze it? What was my approach? And I was honestly baffled. How do you approach a battle when you’re wounded in the middle of the field? I could not understand the questions. And I hated being more confused after I’d written about something. That was where I was used to finding clarity; it was the whole reason I liked writing. But I knew the questions were fair. How was I going to analyze the data? I had not stopped analyzing the data for the past 3 years, but I hadn’t found a
story that stuck. The course had been going so amazingly well that I couldn’t have imagined anything better, and it had also crashed and burned beyond recognition. Understanding both of those true things at the same time was the boulder I kept pushing up the mountain only to watch it roll back down.

The Story of a Study, or the Letter and the Spirit of Thematic Analysis

As I discuss in Chapter 3, I had not always intended to conduct a thematic analysis. I had intended to use the course for narrative inquiry with some discourse analysis sprinkled in, and this is not to suggest that I knew exactly what I meant by that, but nonetheless. And with apologies to the faculty members who I assure you did not teach or endorse this view of discourse analysis, I was going to Sherlock Holmes the heck out of their language to suss out the hegemonic cultural forces that had wormed into their perceptions and were seeping out in their words. Having come out on the other side of a different approach, I realize the problem with what I thought I was going to do: I was going to figure out their stories for them. So when the committee recommended thematic analysis, I thought, why not? I’d been struggling with structure, so let’s call it something. I’ll pull apart their language and then point out the themes in my analyses. I mean, that was probably what I would have ended up doing anyway. Eventually.

I started reading about thematic analysis - Braun and Clarke (2006), Nowell et al.’s (2017) integration of Braun and Clarke’s framework with Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria of trustworthiness, which of course I had to read as well, just in case. Getting to know all about it. Everyone said it was a great methodology for new researchers. The structure, the systematicity, the way it would suit many theoretical perspectives. It sounded promising, but I was ambivalent. I followed the steps. I am not
an organized person. All my work with the data had been listening to the recordings and letting them spark ideas. I’d transcribed only the segments that were interesting to me, mostly for how they used language. These steps talked about transcripts of everything. Annoying, but fine. If this is what it would take to make a solid and plausible chapter 3, I would do it. I transcribed, and I coded, I collapsed codes into categories, and categories into themes. I reviewed excerpts and re-coded. I made lovely maps, and I’m not really a graphic organizer or infographic person, so I was pretty impressed with myself. I looked at what I’d come up with. I liked it. All those interesting things I’d noticed in the language and in the class would fit just fine. I moved onto chapter 4. I led with the map and then wrote up all those interesting things I’d noticed. I tied them to the categories and themes.

The feedback again confused me. How had the things I was talking about in chapter 4 resulted from the thematic analysis? Umm, did you notice the map? It’s color coded. Granted, it precedes 40 pages of stream of consciousness, but headings are so joyless. This loop happened a couple of more times. I could tell I was missing something. And as tough as it seemed themes were for me, I was certainly recognizing a couple from the feedback: This looks like discourse analysis. How is this thematic analysis? Where are you getting this example? What’s the context of this data?

I kept going back to the data extracts in the code sheet and the data log. I didn’t feel like I was making the themes up. They were there. And I knew I was pulling the language apart, but I didn’t know how else to explain. I went back to Reissman’s (2007)
description of thematic analysis as a way “of working with narrative data where the primary focus is on “what” is said, rather than “how,” “to whom,” and “for what purposes” (pp. 53-54). I looked at Braun and Clarke’s (2006) point about defining the data set. I kept looking back at the data log that I hadn’t even wanted to make. I looked again at the research question. And something clicked. I realized that I was still trying to explain what their stories did and meant instead of focusing on what they said. My whole understanding of the course was sharing power and everyone being teachers and learners together, but I had been imposing my way of knowing on the data.

The stories were the heart of the course, and they did not belong to me, at least not at first. I had to go back. My mentor kept telling me to take myself out of the analysis, stop using first person, get some distance. I went back to the stories. I tried to read them each “as a whole.” I realized there was no “whole” in terms of a product. The stories came to be in the presentation and workshopping experiences. They were born in the zone of proximal development. Leslie bringing her own matter-of-fact cultural experience and coming to understand it more clearly by collaborating with Kristine who could spot the missing exposition because of her own cultural differences. Lofton rethinking what he’d presented as his own shortcomings in the private school when Leslie pushed back on the difference between misbehaving and being a normal child. The themes were the shared messages of the stories, and they were one key to understanding what a course like this could do. But the power of this course was in how everyone worked together in a safe house in the ZPD to bring the stories to light.

In my initial attempts at analysis, I had tried to separate the story data from the collaborative workshopping, at first as “talk about stories,” and later through Wortham
and Reyes’s (2015) notion of “narrated events” versus “narrating events.” And there was something to that; those attempts brought the concept of “safety” to the forefront of the analysis, but not as a theme. Appendix 2 illustrates how safety became Waldo in the story of my maps. But here again, the answer was in the stories; they were more than texts students brought; the stories were what the students did, made, and shared together, and as became evident as much from when that creative process was not working well as from when it was, safety was essential as a driver. Safety became the necessary condition of our ZPD, as Wertsch (1985) operationalized it—with the intersubjectivity of a shared situation definition and the semiotic mediation of both plain language and tools like literary devices, like Leslie’s “Jackson 5 short” metaphor, and images or symbols like Kristine’s catalog of homes. Safety created a space for the collaboration that made the stories visible, or understandable, or sharable, or just possible. It was evident in “what was said” because of changes, additions, and clarifications as the stories were told and retold. Those changes suggested a before and after structure in the data that begged the question, before and after what? Safety became the driver and symbiotic partner of the stories. Understanding this allowed me to look more clearly at the themes as what the stories, in their most fully developed forms, had to say.

It’s important to note that I do not see my struggle as reflective of a weakness in the methodology or approach of thematic analysis. From the start, I found Braun and Clarke’s (2006) notion of a “theoretical thematic analysis” appealing. It allowed me to begin coding with the categories already in mind, and while my categories did reflect the research question, they did not reflect a clear understanding of thematic analysis. At times in my coding I felt like Charles Dickens writing a poor person - if the nobility
won’t stick, toss them in the miserly villain pile. Those are the categories. Overall, despite my learning curve, I found the approach effective, if deceptively straightforward. The phases gave me a solid foundation, so even though I had to keep returning to the process as my understanding developed, I wasn’t starting from scratch every time, a technique that had consistently failed me in the past.

**Making Peace with the Themes - Culture is Complex and Dynamic**

As thrilled as I was to finally have a clear understanding of how I was using the thematic analysis approach, I couldn’t help feeling underwhelmed by the themes. I remembered my high school physics teacher gushing about the PhD physicists at some conference because in order to earn that doctorate, they had had to figure out something entirely new! He’d been so impressed that he almost squealed just telling us about having lunch with them. There was some mind-blowing insight about why you shouldn’t hit a ketchup bottle on the bottom to get the ketchup out. Rather you should cup your empty hand like you’re holding the top of the bottle, and use it to catch and stop the bottle as you swing it down toward your plate with the other hand. It’s physics. Newtonian, I think. Objects in motion?19 In any case, I don’t know if that ketchup insight ever earned anyone a PhD or if so, if Heinz ruined that person’s life with the squeezy bottle, but I do know that PhD-level insights are supposed to make people want to have lunch with you.

The primary theme that this analysis identified is that culture is complex and dynamic. Now granted, I’ve heard some popular ideas about culture and education that seem to be based on an oversimplified and essentialist understanding of culture, so maybe

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19 I kind of love that the only thing I remember from AP physics was a story. And I dropped that class, so it also kind of becomes a precedent for this study in terms of drawing conclusions from a class that got cut short. Well done, Mr. Casey.
this theme might seem insightful to someone. But from my reading about culture throughout my years in education, I know the scholarship involves ideas so intricate and nuanced that they hurt my brain. I even read a piece one time that explored all this history and these twistings and turnings around the concept of culture only to reach the conclusion that no one who talks about it knows what they’re saying, so it would probably be better to just abandon the concept altogether. Of culture. “They’ve broken culture, and now it is dead,” said the cultural scholar. “Time to move on.” That’s a paraphrase, of course, and I can’t even find where I read it now, but it was like Nietzsche if Nietzsche were the Pope. This theme was not going to get me invited to lunch. But then I thought about the problem that led me here again.

In that conference room with the whiteboard and the checklist, we weren’t trying to set the world on fire. We knew that we wanted the teachers who came from our programs to be culturally responsive. We knew that despite the talk about cultural responsiveness in the field, too many indicators of inequity still confirmed that not enough teachers, schools, or systems were providing equitable access to learning to students from non-dominant cultures. So we started by trying to define our terms. Maybe in the context of that discussion, “culture is complex and dynamic” is an important insight. Maybe the deductive, top-down approach of starting with the broad concept of culture and creating a rubric that defines that concept as the many differences teachers need to be able to respond to is never going to get you to the same kind of understanding as a more inductive, contextualized approach that begins with the understanding that culture is lived. That it shapes and is shaped by the individuals who live it in their own
fascinating and interconnected ways. That stories and reflections on the experiences of lived culture are valuable to learning.

The richness and potential of lived culture, without students’ or other insiders’ stories, could easily remain opaque to teachers from different cultures. Lee’s (1993) cultural data sets were rich and powerful in part because they began from an understanding of and appreciation for the relevant strengths that students brought with them. The things that students knew and did were relevant to classroom learning, and Lee was able to help students recognize that. But what if Lee, like so many teachers, had been a cultural outsider in relation to her students? The findings of this study suggest that students' stories have the potential to allow teachers and other students to see different cultures in context, as they are lived, providing insight without sparking essentialism.

**Familial influences are consistently powerful but widely variable**

Insights from the secondary themes from this study develop the complexity and dynamism of culture. The insight that family influences are consistently powerful but widely variable is not surprising; however, the stories that fed this theme may provide an opportunity for future research into parenting styles. While a focused examination of the parenting styles that relate to Lofton, Leslie, and Jasmine’s discussions of parental control versus individual responsibility would be necessary to suggest connections to this robust and complex body of research, the informal or conversational take-away that Black parents are more likely to use an authoritarian approach, does not neatly or easily

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20 In a review connecting parenting styles and school outcomes, Spera (2005), explores the authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting style typology established by Baumrind (1966) and cited extensively in scholarship relevant to culturally responsive education.
apply to the nuance that comes through in these stories. Jasmine, whose Black father lovingly supported her transition to independence in her sports participation, clearly does not depict an authoritarian parental figure. But an interesting connection in Leslie and Lofton’s stories suggested that when they were young, their mothers made decisions for or about them without necessarily explaining or discussing the reasons, a practice associated with authoritarian styles. For instance, Lofton described spending the night with classmates in order to be able to get the games on Saturdays since his mother worked, and later discussed somewhat understanding that his mother thought sending him to private school was for the best. Leslie, in developing her story, responds to a question about why her mother straightened her hair by explaining that her mother had three daughters. These depictions of parental control also suggest, however, that while there may not have been an explicit conversation about the rationale, Lofton and Leslie both understood their parents' reasons. In light of Heath’s (1983) ethnography of working class Black and white communities, it’s possible that the practical concerns of managing a family as well as the aspirations and beliefs about school and education would not have needed to be discussed explicitly in Black families, where children are often privy to social interactions and discussions amongst adults than white children, whose social experiences are more likely to be segregated by age. In this way, children from different cultural communities, even if their parents similarly exclude them from decision-making, may have drastically different levels of understanding of how those decisions are made.

To connect this theme back to Meretoja’s (2016) notion of “cultural sense making,” attempting to teach preservice teachers about cultural differences in families through the comparison of styles may allow assumptions and cultural defaults to remain
unquestioned. Recall Meretoja’s premise that individuals’ stories are “woven in relation to cultural narratives that they perpetuate, vary, challenge, and transform” (p. 88). This includes the narratives that individuals use to understand their own experience. Lofton and Leslie’s understandings of their parents’ respective motivation and reasoning influenced how they experienced their parents’ actions, just as Kristine’s lack of understanding influenced her perspective of her mother’s decision making. Frank’s (2010) notion of dialogical narrative analysis suggests that the relationships between narratives are the sites of active remembering, knowing, or understanding. Thus, accessing cultural knowledge through stories allows listeners, and tellers, not only to recognize cultural practices or beliefs, but to understand how those practices or beliefs are understood or experienced by insiders. I do not mean to present these as findings. Rather, thinking and learning about culture through stories, as in this study, can demonstrate that while generalizations about culture may be useful at some levels of abstraction, they will rarely explain specific situations neatly. Because culture is complex.

**Diversity can Isolate or Connect Depending on Aspect and Perspective**

The complexity of culture is supported by the other secondary themes as well. Consider Lofton, for instance. He was (almost) the only Black student in his private school. He felt culturally isolated, and ultimately found his place in a public school. But while his first public school had more Black students than the private school, it was still not a perfect fit. He moved again, and this time, found the community pride, energy, and joy that he needed to feel at home. Imani Perry (1988) describes something different. She also experienced the cultural isolation of only-ness as a Black student at a white private school.
school. And she also left to attend a public school. Perry, however, found the objectivist epistemological foundation and the behaviorist principles at the public school intellectually stifling and ultimately returned to the private school environment to finish high school. While neither story suggests an answer to the challenge of only-ness in schools, together, the stories reveal that perhaps most single approaches would have fallen short of meeting the needs of both students, even though the original problem was similar, because cultures are not monolithic, as Arendt (1970) points out, “storytelling reveals meaning without the error of defining it.” (p. 105). Lofton’s story can simultaneously touch upon stories of similar situations and remain his own. Likewise, even shared cultural knowledge or experiences can present differently, as individuals function within multiple social and cultural communities and will value the characteristics associated with those communities differently, complicating not only established cultural understandings, but even ways of thinking about cultural difference, such as the notion of othering described in Brons (2015). Whereas Loften’s sense of only-ness resulted from the incompatibility of his social identity with that of his private school, Perry (1988) ultimately determined that her intellectual identity took precedence. Tyler, on yet another hand, experienced being one of only a few white students without a problem, but he could not consider being one of the only students on a campus with the home training to speak and be polite. The connections of Loften’s story with others’ stories of different but related experiences revealed the secondary theme that experiencing diversity, or in the case of only-ness, being the diversity, can isolate or connect, depending on the individual significance of the characteristic that defines the difference. Because culture is complex and dynamic.
Replicating within cultural identities or relations reflects personal agency

Leslie planted the seed for the secondary theme that repositioning within cultural identities or relations reflects personal agency when she said, “I became myself,” in the third week of class. I nearly jumped out of my seat. I checked my phone to make sure the recording was still going. Her story of going natural clearly addressed a culturally significant topic, but I’d been a little worried when her initial “presentation” took less than two minutes and could be summarized as, “I used to have longer hair. Then it started to break off, so I cut it.”

But, as Phillips (2013) points out, live storytelling, “is not a lone experience; there must be tellers and listeners. In education this cultivates relationality and learning communities. The involvement of others is necessary for meaning” (p. ii). Leslie had explained that she wanted help and suggestions, and her classmates jumped in with both feet. Through the workshopping, Leslie described her implicit socialization into the white beauty standards that had come to permeate the Black community in America. Straight hair was easier, she’d explained. And I suppose it may be objectively true, if there were some way to calibrate and compare. My hair is straight, and it’s certainly easier to put into a ponytail than my children’s curly hair. But I’d have to know a lot more than I do to speak to whether chemical straightening of curly hair is easier than other Black hair styles. I know that braiding is time consuming, but it can also be kept in for weeks, depending on the type of braids. So, I think it’s fair to say that straight hair can be easier, depending on the end goal. So, when I thought about Leslie’s story over the months and years between that day and this one, sometimes, I thought about how she took control back from her mother who had imposed a white beauty aesthetic on her. At other times, I
thought about her practical decision to better protect the health of her hair, her body, and even the environment, because even beauty culture does not exist in a vacuum. I considered that maybe her whole family was rethinking what Pratt (1991) would term the acculturation of anglo-European hair aesthetics as a reflection of the topic’s return to prominence in broader socio-cultural conversations. As a phenomenon of the contact zone, does a notable change in acculturation signify a shift in intercultural dynamics? After all, Leslie did say she cut her hair “Jackson 5 short.” At other times still, I thought about Leslie’s ex friend and how her position muddied the waters. She had clearly favored straight or long styles before Leslie made the cut, but later was asking for natural hair care tips. So at what point does a cultural element of a dominant culture, that has been acculturated into another culture, become the property of that new culture? Was Leslie rejecting the dominant white culture, or was she repositioning herself within her own complex and dynamic Black culture? And would any of these possible understandings have been possible without the dialogue between cultural beauty aesthetics in which Kristine and Leslie engaged through the development of this story? Would this story have been possible outside the ZPD and safe house of our course? In any case, it was clear that the influences and the implications of Leslie’s decision as well as her story and the telling of it spoke to the depth and breadth of this culturally significant topic. Because culture is complex.

**Context in Measuring Thematic Significance - Obvious or Foundational?**

Ultimately, the significance and potential of the themes the study generated is tied to the problem and research question that drove this study. Yes, culture is complex. I believe that was one of the points I made in designing the course and study. I discussed
the wealth of cultural scholarship and research in chapter 2, and I did not come into this study with the belief that culture was simple or monolithic. And if the theme were the only message of the course, it’s fair to say that I could have just told them that on day one, and saved us all a lot of time. But I had not set out to say something new about culture per se. I had set out to see what we could learn about culture from a class devoted to helping students develop and share their own stories. And when a science teacher invests the time, money, resources, and energy into setting up a lab for her students, and then the students do the experiment, she does not consider it a failure when the experiments (mostly) all have the same results. She didn’t do it to find out what would happen. She knew that “answer” before they started. The point was the experience, letting students try, think, explore, and figure things out. The ZPD, after all, is not really about what a more knowledgeable other can teach, but rather what a learner can do with support.

Thus, one clear strength of this study is that it demonstrates that without having students answer questions from a textbook organized by socio-cultural categories or traits, or even guiding them through a set of culturally relevant readings and responses, without standing in front of them and fighting for their attention so that I could lecture or explain, they worked it out. They looked into their lives and experiences and the lives and experiences of their classmates, and they developed a text for the course together. Basic? Perhaps. Fundamental is a better word. In eight weeks of a semester, meeting for 75 minutes, twice a week, a group of ten students worked together to create the material for an engaging and authentic living text that explored a variety of fascinating and
culturally significant topics. And that’s not nothing. Imagine what we could have done with the other eight weeks.

**Safe Houses and Outliers**

Much of the thinking that drove the writing and revisions of chapter 4 (and chapter 3 to a lesser extent), involved the concept of safety, explored using Pratt’s (1991) concepts of safe houses and contact zones. Safety, in the context of the thematic analysis, became a driver of the stories from which the themes emerged. Students’ stories, and their orientations to and within them took shape in the safe house that our community became. Chapter 4 explores the relationship of three essential stories to the driver of safety. Leslie’s story illustrates the process of collaboration and inquiry through which the students developed and sustained the safe house through the development of the story. Lofton’s story demonstrates how the safe house that students created allowed them to examine facets of their stories that exposed vulnerabilities and uncertainties, clarifying the impact of both stories and themes. And finally Jasmine’s story spoke both to the potential of the safe house as a space where students felt comfortable sharing experiences of real and raw emotion as well as the difficulty of fostering engagement with emotional texts that are also immediate and personal. In the safe house, Jasmine could share the story of losing her father, but her classmates were not able, at least right away, to engage in workshopping in a way that would have helped Jasmine tease out or examine the cultural significance of her story.

The four realms of Foster et al.’s (2020) HiTCRiT can help illuminate the development, affordances, and shortcomings of the safe house that we developed as a community. Using students’ stories as the primary texts for the course had been the
foundation of the course design from its earliest iterations. This realm confirms Graff’s (2008) notion that productive intellectual engagement does not require texts or subjects deemed weighty or significant by an expert. Likewise, culturally responsive teaching does not limit students to texts that exclude their lives and experiences. Rather, relevant and engaging texts foster critical thinking and learning. Through the texts that students shared and developed together, they learned about the complexity of culture as it is lived.

The HiTCRiT also clarifies the importance of the collaborative development that came through in the storytelling of this course. The style of the course came up repeatedly in student reflections as an essential component of what made the course work. Students appreciated being experts on their own cultural perspectives. They liked teaching and learning from one another, and doing so connected them to one another in collaborative inquiry. A top-down style of teaching in a course about cultural responsiveness, especially perhaps from a white professor with a culturally diverse student roster, could have implicitly reinforced the othering that Lee (2007) aptly associates with the idea of the white, middle class default.

Further, using the stories as texts and the collaborative style of the course connected students with one another and with the stories they were crafting together, reflecting the importance of the realm of socio-emotional connections. Likewise, as was the case with Lee’s cultural modeling, the synthesis of texts, style, and socio-emotional connections helped the students begin to grapple with the significance of culture for learning, the institutional knowledge the course was conceived to explore. While the COVID shift cut the course short and made it impossible to get a full and clear picture of students’ knowledge and perceptions after the course, the themes that an analysis of their
stories and reflections identified suggest that they were well on their way toward a deeper and more actionable understanding of culture and learning.

Still, while safety emerged as essential to mediating the collaborative storytelling that drove engagement and inquiry in the course, the connections to Pratt’s (1991) notion of safe houses and the alignment with Foster et al.’s (2020) HiTCRiT do not diminish other important considerations or possible implications of how this course on stories played out. The broad range of stories, along with the stories involving personal trauma in particular may suggest a need for further scaffolding in terms of storytelling, cultural knowledge, or both. The sheer novelty of being asked to tell a personal story may have left students unsure of how to approach the experience.

I remember once in high school, back in the KERA\textsuperscript{21} portfolio days, our Government teacher had us write a personal narrative and our English teacher had us write a short story. We were all a bit baffled by it. We were trained in analytical and expository writing, not creative writing. For some reason, perhaps an area for future research, we all sort of collectively, but without discussing it, decided that the way to succeed at these new types of writing would be to make everyone cry. I remember that at least three of us wrote our personal narratives about the visit we’d taken to the Holocaust museum when our Government class went to DC. For some reason we felt that if we were getting to write about ourselves, we better not seem too happy about it. The same

\textsuperscript{21} The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 was a state reform that, among other initiatives or elements, required writing portfolios from every student at three different grade levels, including 12th grade. The writing portfolios required of 12th graders encouraged writing across the curriculum by mandating that 2 of the required pieces come from classes other than English. Callahan (1997) provides context and more thorough description of the portfolios and the implications of how they were used in school assessments. For students, they meant we got to write fiction and personal narratives all of a sudden, when we’d been used to writing exclusively for analytical / expository purposes.
notion seemed to prevail with our short stories. I remember our teacher doing this big comic face palm during his lecture the day after he’d reviewed our first drafts. “Guys, there is no rule that someone has to die,” he’d nearly pleaded. “Sorry, Mr. Schenk, “ I thought, “I know you’ve grown attached to my very relatable protagonist, Garrison the homeless war vet with a heart of gold, but I don’t like his chances.”

This is not to suggest that Jasmine or Carol, who both wrote about losing their fathers, aimed to make people cry. Rather, I wonder if assigning a personal story, and making it the content of the course, may put pressure on students to share things more personal than they’d really like. Perhaps those sad and personal things seem more significant. I don’t know, but it is something that I would explore if I had the opportunity to teach a course like this again. The impact of the safe house may be a factor to consider as well. I think of this in relation to Terrence, a student who has not appeared hardly in this write-up since the introductions in Chapter 1. Terrence was 27 years old and was relatively quiet. He would chat with the people sitting right beside him, but he did not often jump in and add to the workshopping sessions. Once, when Lofton asked him specifically what he thought, it was so significant to Terrence that he brought it up as evidence of how powerful the class was in his midterm conference. He loved that the students were teaching each other. He was moved by Lofton asking him what he thought because to him it meant that his classmates valued his wisdom. I had hoped this was a good sign because though I had felt that I had gotten to know Terrence somewhat, as he stayed after class twice just to talk to me about his mother, his life as a non-traditional student, and his home, he had not yet shared a cultural autobiography. He was the only
student who had not shared at least once. I regularly asked him about the assignment and how I could help, but he always assured me he’d be ready next class.

In our conference, after he’d mentioned enjoying the presentations and workshop sessions, I brought it up again. I asked him if he was comfortable presenting. He assured me that he was. He really liked everyone in the class. He was working on a story about getting racially profiled and pulled over by the police. He thought it was important, and he was almost done. He would email it to me as soon as he left our meeting so that I could update his grade before I left campus for spring break. The next I heard from Terrence was several weeks into the pivot. He emailed me along with his other professors to say he was completing coursework for all four classes from a broken cell phone that he could only use when his friend who had wifi was home. I told him everyone had passed my class and to send me what he could. I did not hear from him again.

Terrence was not the first student to tell me he was working on an assignment that I never received. As I mentioned above, I’ve been known to play a little fast and loose with the, “I’m right on top of that” trope myself. Terrence’s brief preview may have been just one more in the endless parade of “I’ll gladly pay you Tuesday” type of stories we tell ourselves and our instructors. But it also might not have been. Much of the pressure of producing something really stellar had been removed in this course by students who got up and shared nothing more than an overview of an idea. Leslie’s story is featured in the findings, but while she had pictures to help support her idea, Mindy, who told her story of a day in the life of a single mother, just talked. She wasn’t sure what kind of presentation she wanted to create, so she got feedback on what form or medium would work well. Terrence had been in class during presentations that felt informal and
conversational. Still, it could be that he hated to present even without the pressure to be polished or even finished. But I believed that if that were the case, he would have sent me the draft as he said he would. There are many possibilities, but the one with implications for teaching a course in this way is the possible pressure of being in a community that has become a safe house. The workshopping sessions were powerful and productive, but I did not call on people to participate, and people did not participate equally. It is possible that seeing everyone else so engaged and comfortable added pressure to appear as comfortable as they were, for instance by telling a difficult and personal story about an encounter with the police. This is not a clear limitation of the study design, but it does merit consideration and may connect with research on trauma narratives.

**Parting Gifts & Looking Ahead**

The unceremonious and involuntary end of the course introduced some limitations to the study. We lost half of our time together, including at least two more presentations of the autobiographies and the collaborative analysis of the finished products. This means that I do not have either finished products or the results of analyzing the stories for their cultural significance together, both of which I had hoped to collect as data. The primary purpose of those elements, had we been able to finish the course, would have been to illuminate change and growth in the stories as well as to confirm what the students learned. Above I argue that the thematic analysis reveals that the students’ stories came together as a powerful and authentic living text for a course on cultural responsiveness. And the creation of that text was most certainly an important part of the course. Still, ideally, the second half of the course would have allowed students to continue developing and using that text to understand the implications of the complexity and dynamism of
culture, particularly as it applies to teaching and learning. We had more reflection to do together, and doing it would have given me more insight into what the students learned and how their learning might influence their views on teaching and learning.

Nonetheless, this wonderful group of students did not leave me entirely in the dark about what they learned and what it all meant to them. The midterm conferences and the final reflections submitted by the few students who were able to continue with the course in the second half gave me the opportunity to ground my analysis in students’ reflections on the course as well as the stories they developed. Their reflections kept me connected to the students who had walked into that room, even if I couldn’t reach many of them after they’d left.

Students’ reflections on their learning helped me reconcile what often felt like the discrepancy between what I had originally set out to do in the course and what, in light of this analysis, I am confident that we were able to do together given the time and circumstances. In chapter 3, I discussed the importance of Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) to the conception of the course. I wanted students to serve as cultural experts, or “more knowledgeable others,” for one another to develop their cultural repertoires. While the ties to the thematic findings presented in chapter 4 to the driver of safety do suggest that students’ collaboration and sharing created a safe space in which they could engage, comments like Kristine’s statement about how her understanding of Leslie’s story gave her new insight on other issues related to Black children and their hair in schools as well as other students’ reflections about teaching and learning as equals throughout the course suggest an interesting
potential connection between the ZPD I had hoped to foster and the safety to explore and try on new perspectives afforded by the safe house that students constructed together.

And just as the course experience suggests that safety may relate to the ZPD, students’ reflections about the power of teaching and learning from one another through storytelling may suggest that the students’ NAP experiences met Wertsch’s (1985) condition of a shared situation definition, or “the way in which a setting or context is represented - that is defined - by those who are operating in that setting,” within the ZPD (p. 8). The reflections on learning explored in Chapter 4 suggest that stories and storytelling, or perhaps the shared purpose and autonomy of choosing and owning the course content, helped participants approach even their own stories as learners. This possibility is supported by Tyler’s recognition that, even as a white man, he had a cultural perspective that was important to consider in relation to culturally responsive teaching, and Jasmine’s surprise at her own willingness to share her story, despite its difficulty, and her realization that the course taught her more about herself than she had expected. While more data would allow a closer examination of these concepts, these potential connections, along with the more well supported findings of this study, support the value of further research.

In addition to the COVID pivot limitations, however, there were other limitations that I knew about from the beginning. These may be more properly understood as calculated risks. For instance, I knew that relying on students’ stories to make up the content of the course was a risk. Students from very similar backgrounds and cultural perspectives might not have had access to the differences in perspective and understanding that drove so much engagement in this instance. I worried a lot about that
leading up to the class, but having spent so long with the nuance and complexity of the stories, I can see that a similar approach might still be rich and valuable. I would be hopeful no matter who walked through the door if I could do it all again. But the participants were more than their experiences of and with diverse cultural identities. The incredible luck of the draw of the personalities of the students who came together in that room makes it hard to give credit for anything good that emerged to the philosophy or design of the course or study. The students were exceptional and particularly well-suited to collaboration. And though Leslie and Jasmine both mentioned in their midterm conferences the importance of the small group work I employed in the first few class sessions in building comfort with their classmates, much of the sense of safety that seemed to influence the other participants likely emerged from the workshopping of Leslie’s story. If she had not been courageous enough to present it before she knew how it would be understood or received, and if Kristine had not been both genuinely interested and outgoing enough to ask for cultural context, that discussion might not have happened. In fact, it had already been such a rich and fruitful discussion that at one lull, I almost wrapped it up to move on to the next presentation. And then Kristine asked about the emotional impact of the transition, and Leslie responded, “Umm. I will say I kinda like… I became myself.” As noted above, that statement has stayed with me. I have forgotten to pick my children up at school on more than one occasion, but I have never forgotten those words. Or her face in that moment. She was realizing it right there in real time. And that moment almost didn’t happen. Recognizing the luck of what happened in that room has been as much a part of trying to discuss conclusions for me as coming to grips with the pivot that broke our community apart.
The many points that were clearly outside the control of the course and study design make it difficult to make recommendations for future research. Don’t have a global pandemic in the middle of your course is high on the list, for sure. Be sure that only cool people, preferably from a variety of interesting backgrounds sign up for your course. It’s like when gorgeous 20 year olds on YouTube have videos about how to look young. It feels, if not outright absurd, at least slightly naive. I recall Elizabeth Bennet teasing Jane for describing her admiration of Mr. Bingley in terms of his personality and manners: “He is also handsome,” replied Elizabeth, “which a young man ought likewise to be, if he possibly can. His character is thereby complete” (Austen, 1813/2003, Ch. 4). While the study of this course has illuminated some interesting and potentially promising connections, it would be disingenuous to ignore the role of luck or happy chance. Of course, it is also possible that this experience represents the type of class culture that coalesces around stories and storytelling, or that like storytelling, learning about culture is not something that one can do alone. It is possible that the intersubjectivity and connection that autobiographical storytelling demands will frequently support or foster the development of a safe house in the ZPD. Or that treating students as experts on their own experiences and inviting their experiences into learning spaces as meritorious or worthy of study that empowers them “to invoke their lived experiences as a source of knowledge, a “text” that they can use to discover their own hidden intellectualism” (Graff, 2008, p. 69). The truth is, for all of the frustration of having the course interrupted by a catastrophic global event, this study supports the potential of courses that center students’ stories and collaborative inquiry to engage them in explorations of culture and its significance for teaching and learning.
REFERENCES

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg


Bishop, R. S. (1990, March). Windows and mirrors: Children’s books and parallel cultures. In *California State University reading conference: 14th annual conference proceedings* (pp. 3-12).


Boykin, A. W., & Noguera, P. (2011). *Creating the opportunity to learn: Moving from research to practice to close the achievement gap*. ASCD.


APPENDIX A: SYLLABUS
EDU 204 - Cultural Responsiveness
3 Credit Hours
Course Syllabus - Spring 2020

Instructor: Leah Halliday
Email: leah.halliday@
Phone: 
Office hours: By appt.

“One form of will seems to involve the rendering of other wills as willful; one form of will assumes the right to eliminate the others”
-- Sara Ahmed, Willful Subjects

Mission, Vision, and Core Values

The student learning outcomes (SLOs) of EDU 204 directly support the mission, vision, and core values of . This class intends to allow you an opportunity to fulfill the mission of . Here’s our mission:

, building on its legacy of achievement as a historically black, liberal arts, and 1890 Land Grant University, affords access to and prepares a diverse population of traditional and non-traditional students to compete in a multifaceted, ever changing global society by providing student-centered learning while integrating teaching, research and service through high-quality undergraduate and select graduate programs. is committed to keeping relevant its legacy of service by proactively engaging the community in partnerships on civic projects driven by the objective of positively impacting the quality of life of the citizens of .

For more information, go to http:// to learn about our vision and core values – student centered philosophy, excellence and innovation, ethical conduct, and social responsibility.

School of Education Strategic Plan

Mission

As the first public institution of higher education to prepare African American teachers in , the School of Education is grounded in history, theory, and research. Building on our proud legacy, we now form a diverse, supportive community that promotes cultural competence, provides access to resources, creates opportunities for meaningful learning, engages in effective problem solving, and activates positive system change for all.

Vision
The School of Education collaborates with partners to offer educational opportunities through which individuals from myriad cultures learn together in community and grow into culturally competent, highly skilled, professional leaders in a global society.

Cultural Components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abilities</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Life philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Occupation/career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family structure</td>
<td>Political beliefs/affiliations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender identity</td>
<td>Racial/ethnic identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical location</td>
<td>Religion/spiritual beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/wellness</td>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notice to Student Teachers with Disabilities

Students with documented disabilities may receive assistance and support from the ___ Disability Resource Center (DRC; http://__). If you need accommodations and/or modifications due to a disability, call the DRC at ___ or visit it at ___ room 220. It is your responsibility to (1) obtain written verification of your disability from the DRC and (2) give a copy of the signed document to your course instructor. The document will outline the specific accommodations/modifications you need. Approval is not retroactive, which means that accommodations/modifications become effective, in this course, when your instructor receives the DRC document. If you need help, get your verification immediately.

Catalog Description

This course is intended for undergraduates with an interest in teaching as they consider and/or seek admission to the Educator Preparation Program (EPP). It is designed to engage students in an exploration of narratives to perceive the strengths in a wide variety of cultural experiences and develop the critical literacies they will need to recognize and leverage students' cultural beliefs, strengths, and areas of expertise.

Course Purpose

Despite a common profession amongst progressive educators that all children are capable of learning, deficit perspectives, both explicit and implicit, continue to color the educational experiences of children in schools. Even a belief in the potential of each individual student, in and of itself, is not enough to counteract the systemic cultural hegemony that privileges a particular set of cultural norms. And understanding deviations from those norms is complex. As Victoria Purcell-Gates writes, “whether we
interpret differences among children - or adults - as deficit or difference depends primarily on our preconceptions, attitudes toward, and stereotypes we hold toward the individual children’s communities and cultures” (2002).

The purpose of this course is to develop a strong foundation of understanding and celebrating cultural differences by critically reading, writing, and retelling narratives, personal experiences, and community observations, and to build upon that foundation an approach to teaching and learning that is intentionally centered on the potential of a rich variety of cultural assets.

**Student Learning Outcomes**

**Cultural Competence Student Learning Outcomes**

Cultural Self-awareness: Articulate insight into own cultural rules, values, and biases (e.g. seeking complexity; aware of how her/his experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description and increased effectiveness in multicultural interactions).

Knowledge: Demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or belief and practices.

Empathy: Interprets intercultural experiences from the perspective of one’s own as well as other’s world view and demonstrate ability to act in a supportive manner that recognizes the feeling of another cultural group. Also, articulate complex understanding of cultural differences in verbal and non-verbal communication (e.g., demonstrates understanding of the degree to which people use physical contact which communicating in different cultures or use direct/indirect and explicit/implicit meaning) and is able to skillfully negotiate a shared understanding based on those differences.

Curiosity: Ask complex questions about other cultures, seek out and articulate answers to these questions that reflect multiple cultural perspectives.

Openness: Initiates and develops interactions with culturally different others. Suspends judgment and values her/his interactions with culturally different others.

**Alignment with Standards and Regulations**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Comp- SLOs</th>
<th>Teachers Standards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural self-awareness: Articulate insights into own cultural rules, values, and biases (e.g. seeking complexity; aware of how her/his experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description and increased effectiveness in multicultural interactions).</td>
<td>Standard 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge: Demonstrates sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices.</td>
<td>Standard 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard 3 (a, b)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard 4 (a, b)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy: Interprets intercultural experiences from the perspective of one’s own as well as other’s world view and demonstrate ability to act in a supportive manner that recognizes the feeling of another cultural group. Also, articulate complex understanding of cultural differences in verbal and non-verbal communication (e.g., demonstrates understanding of the degree to which people use physical contact which communicating in different cultures or use direct/indirect and explicit/implicit meaning) and is able to skillfully negotiate a shared understanding based on those differences.</td>
<td>Standard 3 (a, b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard 4 (a, b)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity: Asks complex questions about other cultures, seeks out and articulates answers to these questions that reflect multiple cultural perspectives.</td>
<td>Standard 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard 3 (a, b)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard 4 (a, b)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Assistance with technology. Here is whom to contact at for help with technology:

Information Technology (IT) Help Desk at helpdesk@__.edu or __:

**Education computer lab**

The education computer lab is available to all candidates in the School of Education. It is located in __, and lab hours are 8:00 am - 4:00 pm Monday through Friday, except when it is used for classes or meetings. The computers have easy access to Microsoft Office (e.g., Word, Excel, PowerPoint) and the internet. No printer is available.

**Academic honesty**

We expect all __ students to be honest. You may get good ideas from the internet if you cite any and all sources. However, using an idea from the internet, without citing the source is considered plagiarism. Follow APA Style® in citing all references. KSU policies regarding academic honesty, including the offenses of cheating and plagiarism, are upheld in this course. Academic honesty is addressed in the current __ University Catalogue.

**Required Readings**

*Shared texts (whole group):*


*Book Groups (small groups):*


*Articles / Excerpts/ Others (provided on Blackboard - this list may change):*


*Film / Television / Video:*

*The IT Crowd, “Are we not Men?”*
*Blackish, “Who’s Afraid of the Big Black Man?”*
*The Great Debaters (in-class viewing)*
*Do I Sound Gay? (in-class)*
*Fabulous! The Story of Queer Cinema (in-class)*

*While the texts below will be worked into the course structure, the critical inquiry the students and teacher engage in as a community will inform additional choices, and, if need be, substitutions.*

**Course Objectives**

In this course, students will:

- Critically read, write, compose, and retell a variety of texts and narratives involving culture and education.
- Develop a culturally responsive stance on teaching and learning.
- Recognize and articulate educational perspectives and practices that are founded on deficit thinking.
- Recognize and articulate cultural assets in both new and familiar cultures.
- Leverage cultural assets to generate creative approaches to communicating, teaching, and learning across cultures.

**Course Assignments**

Provocateur / Discussion Lead (20%)

Each week 1-3 students will engage the class in a discussion of the readings and ideas that emerge by introducing a relevant artifact - video, article, image, story - that challenges or expands on the texts. The provocateur will drive discussion with questions and pose problems to drive group inquiry and discovery. Each student will serve in this role at least 2 times throughout the term.
Book Groups (20%)

Students will select one YA novel, in addition to the shared readings, to explore in small groups. Students will set the pace of reading, organize discussions, and develop a multimodal presentation on the cultural significance of their book.

Cultural Narrative Project (CNP) (20%)

“Literacy and awareness themselves do not change oppressive conditions in school and society. Knowledge is power only for those who can use it to change their conditions” (Shor, 1992, p. 6). Critical literacies demand not only reflection through the reading of the word and the world, but also action. Movement toward change. As students undertake to develop their own perceptions of cultural assets, perceptions that will inform their teaching philosophies and practices, this project will provide them with an opportunity to challenge the entrenched deficit perspectives that make these journeys of discovery essential in the first place. With the CNP, students will contribute narratives of cultural assets to larger discussions of teaching and learning. This culminating project may take the form of a blog, webpage, podcast, social media campaign, or even a journal article. The goal is to push back against a particular idea, founded in deficit thinking, with a thoughtful exploration of a particular cultural asset that could be leveraged in teaching and learning.

Cultural Autobiography (20%)

“Without a sense of identity, there can be no real struggle” (Freire, 2018). Aspiring teachers who would understand and connect with the cultural assets of their students must begin by understanding and connecting with their own cultural assets. Further, such aspiring teachers must become aware of the many ways that culture is manifested through narrative and reflection. This assignment will allow class participants to reflect on their own experiences and world views through a cultural lens. Participants will return to this autobiography throughout the semester - in weeks 2, 6, & 14.

Professional Dispositions (20%)

To meet the objectives of this course, of developing cultural responsiveness through critical literacy, every member of the class community must fully engage and participate. The expectation is that every student will attend every class meeting, on time, fully prepared, and ready to contribute to the development of new understandings. This assignment will be assessed via negotiation at midterm and the final week of class during a one-on-one consultation between each student and the instructor.

Expectations
Attendance and Assignment Submission

Each student may elect to take one self-care day during the semester. This may take the form of either
  ● One excused (no questions asked) absence from class, provided the student is not presenting, or
  ● One 24-hour grace period on an assignment submission.
Beyond this single exception, late work will not be accepted, and absences will influence the dispositions grade.

Membership in the Class Community

Exploring culture and cultural narratives in this course will involve challenging preconceived notions and stereotypes, understanding and centering privilege, and interrogating our own experiences and those of others. This process may be uncomfortable at times. Our views will not always coincide, and we may disagree even after passionate discussion. That is okay. As long as we remain respectful to one another and open to new ideas, we will all benefit from this experience. To foster openness, honesty, and trust, discussions that take place in our class should be treated as confidential.

Assessment Strategy

Assignment weights are noted in the descriptions above. While rubrics and/or templates will be co-constructed and negotiated within the class community, every assignment will include evaluation of the following elements:
  ● Maintaining a critical perspective
  ● Decentering privilege
  ● Challenging deficit thinking
  ● Enacting creative cultural responsiveness

As described in the catalog, grading will reflect the following scale*:
A - 90% - 100%
B - 80% - 89%
C - 70% - 79%
D - 60% - 69%
F - 0% - 59% *I always round up if your average is between whole numbers.

Course Schedule

Excerpts and articles (indicated in the schedule by *) are housed in Blackboard - The readings are subject to frequent change. I will announce changes in class and on
Blackboard weekly modules. The “Assignments Due” column will remain very close to this outline, and changes will be announced well in advance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Readings</th>
<th>Assignments Due</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1    | What is Culture?  
      Cultural Responsivity, what is it?  
      Establish Provocateur Groups / criteria  
      Autobiography template | Video - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGTVjJuRaZ8#action=share](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGTVjJuRaZ8#action=share)  
      Banks - 5 Dimensions (Bb) | Complete Acknowledgement of Receipt of Course Information survey on Bb. (1/16)  
      What is culture? (1/16) |
| 2    | Culture - Who & why?  
      The importance of narrative  
      Choose Book Group Novels | Gorski - Good Intentions are not Enough  
      Rose - “I Just Wanna be Average” * | Provocateur, group 1 (2/21)  
      Cultural autobiography, brainstorming (2/23) |
      Film - *Do I Sound Gay?* | Cultural autobiography, draft 1 (1/28)  
      Provocateur, group 2 (Gender Equity) |
| 4    | Language | Delpit, Ch. 3, 7, & 8 | Provocateur, group 3 |
| 5    | Learning and the Will  
      Culturally Autobiography Rubric development | Ahmed, Ch. 1* | Provocateur, group 4 |
| 6    | Beauty  
      Book group time | Brooks *  
      Kincaid* | Cultural autobiography, draft 2  
      Provocateur, group 5 |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Provocateur, group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Social Expectations</td>
<td>Hanauer* Video - <em>The IT Crowd</em> Video - <em>Blackish</em></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>YA Novels</td>
<td>Book Group Meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>YA Novels</td>
<td>Book Group Presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The role of culture in the structure and aims of schooling</td>
<td>Love, Ch 1-3 Royal &amp; Gipson*</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Educational justice</td>
<td>Love, Ch 4-5</td>
<td>Cultural Narrative Check-in 1 Provocateur, group 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Sustaining Cultural Assets</td>
<td>Love, Ch 6-7 Paris &amp; Alim*</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Cultural influences in preschool and primary</td>
<td>Heath* Ladson-Billings* Meier*</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Social Learning</td>
<td>Film - <em>Fabulous! The Story of Queer Cinema</em></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Pedagogies of Action</td>
<td>Film - <em>The Great Debaters</em></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Wrapping up</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Narrative Presentations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
- TBA: To Be Announced
- *: Author(s) with special designation
- Provocateur: Group leader or facilitator for the session
APPENDIX B: GRAVEYARD OF THEMATIC MAPS

Thematic map 1
Thematic Map 2

Thematic Map 3 - This version was my favorite visually because I decided it looked like a feminist spaceship. But it still overstates the balance in the data.
Thematic Map 4 - This one is an improvement in working safety into the structure.

Thematic Map 5 - This version felt cleaner than those that came before. It felt more like a map that could guide the write up.
Thematic Map 6 - This one felt like I was getting close, but I was still treating the data from all 3 of the data types in the same way. This version reflects the centrality of safety.

Thematic Map 7 - This one is very close to the final version, but with slightly less well-aligned levels. Looks like a cool undersea guitar for an octopus.
CURRICULUM VITAE

Leah M. Halliday
lmhallilday@gmail.com

Education:

Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education February 2023 – current
Coordinator, Affordable Learning Kentucky (ALKY)
Ph.D. 2023 Curriculum and Instruction - Languages, Literacies, Cultures, & Communities
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY

M.S. 2016 Human Resources/Organization Development Workplace Learning
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY

M.A.T. 2006 Secondary English
Agnes Scott College
Atlanta, GA

B.A. 2001 English
Oglethorpe University
Atlanta, GA

Experience:

Kentucky State University August 2015 – February 2023
Instructional Designer, Office of Online Learning (2021 – 2023)
Instructor, English Education and English (2018 – 2023)
Visiting Instructor, Literature Languages and Philosophy (LLP) (2015 – 2018)
➢ Advisor, English Education Preparatory Program
➢ English Education Program Representative, Teacher Education Committee (TEC)
➢ Director, Adolescent Literacy Project (ALP)
➢ Co-Principal Investigator, JBG Co-Requisite Grant from KY Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE)

Scholars Strategy Network
Graduate Fellow, Kentucky Chapter
July 2021 - June 2022

University of Louisville
Part-time Lecturer, College of Education and Human Development (CEHD)
Graduate Research Assistant, Collaborative Consortium for Transdisciplinary Social Justice Research (CCTSJR)
Graduate Research Assistant, College of Education and Human Development (CEHD)
August 2018 – June 2021

Jefferson Community and Technical College
Spring 2013 term
English as a Second Language Instructor, Adjunct

Kentucky State University
Instructional Counselor – Academic Center for Excellence (2006-2011)
Instructor, Adjunct – Literature, Languages, and Philosophy (2007-2015)
2006 - 2015

Publications:

Professional and Academic Presentations:
Kentucky Convergence Conference
- Lightning Talk: “Course Marking & More: Institutional Supports for Open Education”
- Panel Presentation: “Exploring Open Education in Kentucky”
November 2023

Tennessee Chapter, National Association of Multicultural Education Conference
- Presentation: “Developing, Understanding, and Planning a Heuristic for Culturally Responsive Pedagogies”
July 2019

Kentucky State University Faculty Institute
- Presentation: “Excellence in Teaching: Using Visual Ice-Breakers to Engage Students”
January 2016

Spring Research Conference: University of Kentucky
- Research presentation: “The Student/Institution Relationship”
May 2016
Council on Postsecondary Education Student Success Summit       April 2016
  • Poster presentation: “English and Reading Acceleration at KSU”
Georgia Council for Teachers of English (GCTE) Conference       February 2006
  • Panel presentation: “Transpoemation: Transforming Original Poetry into Mini-Movies”
Oglethorpe University Community Roundtables       February 2001
  • Served as facilitator for community-wide discussions on race and diversity.
Emory University Undergraduate Conference on Women’s and Gender Studies       March 2001
  • Paper presentation: “Active Submission: A Contradiction in Terms?”

Professional Development:
Association of College and University Educators (ACUE)
  ● Facilitating a course on Effective Online Teaching Practices
KY Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE)
  ● Attended 2016 Student Success Summit
National Association of Developmental Education (NADE)
  ● Attended 2016 Conference in Anaheim
KY Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE)
  ● Attended 2009 Student Success Summit Conference
KCTCS – Success Now Learning Academy Conference
  ● Participated in 3rd, 4th, and 5th conference in Louisville
University of Missouri, Kansas City (UMKC)
  ● Completed “Supplemental Instruction Supervisor” Certification in 2008
Kentucky State University: University Professional Development Center
  ● Completed Turnitin Software Training 2008
National Association of Developmental Education (NADE)
  ● Attended 2007 conference in Nashville
Kentucky Association of Developmental Education (KADE)
  ● Attended 2006 conference in Hazard and 2007 conference in Bowling Green
Association of Tutoring Professionals (ATP)
  ● Completed 2006 Online Workshop: “Cognitive Learning and its Application to the Tutorial Setting”